

Religion as *techne*

A study of the Anatomy of Contemplative Practice

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Abstract

This study is a comparative examination of three contemporary systems of contemplative practice – mindfulness, christfulness and centering prayer. The texts of these systems of contemplative practice will be analyzed, and the contemplative practices described therein will be practiced as well. Through such an approach the traditional dichotomy between observer/practitioner and insider/outsider will be challenged. An assumption of this study shall be that such an approach is thought to enable new perspectives to arise, and are therefore considered worthwhile.

The conceptual category of *techne* will also be analyzed, and thereafter applied as a lens through which to study contemplative practices. Friedrich von Hügel's philosophy of religion will also be used throughout. The main purpose of the study is to provide an anatomy of contemplative practice.

In these days when contemplative practices are starting to go mainstream and the hype of mindfulness can be felt throughout the Western world, there is a need to map and elucidate such practices and honestly assess their potential and worth.

Preface

The journey has been long and arduous, and very educational, but now the time is up.

It is December, and time for thanks:

To my supervisor the eminent Professor Jens Braarvig, for his continuous support, intellectual sparring and help throughout this process;

To the Britton lab and associates, for letting me share your company and vagabond the summer of '13;

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Oslo 1. December, UIO

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1 Introduction

Approximately 2500-2000 years ago, or possibly even earlier, some groups of the human species made a monumental discovery. They discovered that the careful regulation of attention, of breathing and of movement, and abstaining from basic bodily needs like food, drink and sex all seemed to affect their psyches and effect certain peculiar responses in their experience of the world. They discovered that through the practice of different techniques, through discipline, they could transform themselves. Consequently, elaborate systems of attention-regulating technologies (today often called contemplative) and of magical procedures to control the world (sometimes called rituals) were expounded and gradually systematized, eventually forming into major religions like e.g. Jainism, Buddhism and eventually Daoism. At least this is the picture presented by ancient sources from India and China if taken at face value¹. Today, there is a growing resurgence and popularization going on about the effectiveness of inner training – i.e. of attention regulation. Concepts like “meditation,” “contemplation,” “mindfulness,” and “neuroplasticity” have achieved mainstream usage in the West. This study is part of an attempt to examine and clarify what lies behind this resurgence, by analyzing the very structure of attention-regulation technologies – what I shall call contemplative practice.

My approach will be comparative and threefold. First, I will examine and trace the conceptual development of the Greek concept *technē* (usually translated as “craft” or “art”), and use this concept as a lens for understanding particular religious practices. This might seem novel and a bit far-fetched, but in fact it is neither. Techniques of all kinds are found throughout the history of religions – techniques of changing or influencing nature (rituals), techniques of self-transcendence (contemplative-mystical), techniques of healing (shamanism), etc. The religious expert or specialist is often someone with a certain skill or set of skills related to such techniques, possessing technical know-how and often a toolbox from which he draws his expertise. Thus *technē* has been used in the past, emically, by great thinkers such as e.g. Plato, the Stoics and Proclus, in the sense of a specific art-form or craft that must be mastered². More recently, *technē* has also been used etically, implicitly by researchers such as Eliade³,

¹ As shall be examined later, the presentation and interpretation of ancient texts should not be taken at face value, but must rather be contextualized before we can make sense of them. See e.g. (Sharf 1995)

² For more on Plato’s and the Stoics’ usage of *technē*, see chapter 3. Proclus usage is in relation to ritualistic-magical procedures (theurgy), which he calls *hieratike technē*. See (Tanaseanu-Döbler 2013)

³ In his analyses of techniques of yoga (Eliade 1969) and techniques of shamanism (Eliade 1964)

and explicitly by Heidegger and Foucault⁴. Examining further the meanings and applications of that concept, then, is in fact a dive into the past, and not completely unprecedented. Second, using *techne* as a research category, I shall examine through my understanding of that concept three texts that present contemplative techniques that are practiced today, by working out a comparative analysis. As such, I choose to delimit my study of *techne* to its contemplative variants found in the contemporary world, and will therefore not include ritualistic, cultic or shamanistic material in my analysis, even though these are certainly relevant for a more complete understanding of *techne*'s relation to religious practice. Thus, I will focus on one set of religious practice – i.e. contemplative practice – by comparing three cases through the lens of *techne*. Third and finally, I will test out the contemplative practices described in the texts, as a way of conducting participant observation.

1.1 Research Questions and Structure

My main research question will be: *to what extent can contemporary forms of contemplative practice be understood as a form of techne (art or craft)?*

Before I can start examining that question, I need to first elaborate what *techne* is all about, and secondly I must establish a workable definition of contemplative practice. I have therefore structured this dissertation in three parts. In chapter 2, I delimit the objects of study and summarize earlier relevant research on contemplative technologies as well as the theoretical lenses through which I will view the material (chapter 3). In chapter 4 I try a somewhat superficial attempt at Begriffsgeschichte by using and tracing the history of *techne* as a conceptual tool for understanding contemplative practice specifically, and religion generally. In this chapter I will also work out a definition of contemplative practice, and the theories of Friedrich von Hügel on religion and mysticism will also be emphasized. In chapters 5-7, I present the source material through the theoretical lenses elaborated in chapters 2-4. The material in these case studies chapters will be presented using their own words, unless I explicitly state otherwise. Chapters 8 and 9 consist of an analysis, comparison and critique of the source material and my approaches to it, before I conclude the study in chapter 10.

⁴ Heidegger explicitly discussed *techne* in his great essay on technology (Heidegger 1954), and Foucault relates it to what he calls “technologies of the self” especially in his later works. (Foucault et al. 1988) and (Foucault et al. 2005).

1.2 Motivation and Relevance

My motivation for this study is both personal and academic. In my adolescence I practiced and experimented for several years with many different techniques of attention regulation, most of which resembled mindfulness practices as described in chapter 5. I did this because I wanted to see if they worked. I was attracted to the idea that metaphysical questions were supposedly up for investigation through different types of practices. Here was a possible procedure through which I could supposedly investigate the nature of reality. Through such practicing I experienced a number of interesting phenomena, but nothing too out of the ordinary. The experiences did however ingrain in my mind that a lot was possible through the “simple” regulation of one’s own attention. This led to my academic interest in religion in general, and contemplative practices in particular. I am convinced that more research, scientific and humanistic, on mapping and uncovering contemplative experiences, practices and their effects will provide great discoveries within a variety of fields – e.g. medicine, psychology, neuroscience, linguistics. It is interesting to note that despite the long history of contemplative traditions throughout the world, there is still little scholarly understanding of what goes on in a practitioners psyche, and why. However, with the advent of the participatory turn (see chapter 2), this has already begun to change. I hope this small contribution might be a tiny step in that direction.

1.3 Sources and Limitations

My primary source material consists of three manuals of three distinct contemplative systems of practice: mindfulness, christfulness and centering prayer. The former is Buddhist-Secular, the latter two are Christian. These were chosen based on their popularity, apparent technical similarities, and being available in languages I master. In the spirit of the participatory subjective anthropotechnic turn (see chapter 2), I shall test out the practices explicated in these textual sources, and review how such practicing effects my reading and understanding of the source material. This study is in other words a study of text and practice, of interpretation and experience. I will focus exclusively on contemplative practices and their relation to *techne*, resulting in an elaboration of both.

PART I –
THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

2 Theory and Method

A number of concepts will be applied throughout this study, some of which denote numerous meanings. For this reason, I will establish some theoretical preliminaries to clarify how I understand and intend to use these terms throughout this dissertation. For coherency, my own conceptualizations of *techne*, technification, technical mysticism, religion and contemplative practice will be explored together in chapter 4.

2.1 Secularization and Weberian Disenchantment

Secularization is a multifaceted and multi-dimensional concept of modernity that needs clarification. I will use this analytical term based mainly on the theories of sociologist of religion Karel Dobbelaere.⁵ According to him, secularization could be understood in three senses: (i) referring to the increasing functional differentiation of society into distinct spheres (that used to be primarily under religious leadership and direction, like education, science, legislation, health care, etc.)⁶; (ii) referring to a process of presumed decline in religious activity (e.g. worship attendance) and in adherence to religious teachings and beliefs (e.g. belief in an after-life, or a deity); and finally (iii) referring to changes within the religious economy. Such changes can mean that religious communities alter their character, standards, even values, to accommodate a new rapidly-changing religious environment or economy – e.g. Scandinavian Christian congregations re-focusing on teaching practical contemplative techniques in an attempt to halt the drastic decline in church attendance and in answer to a critique of a too theological-intellectual, spiritually poor traditional church at the expense of a living practical experience-oriented church (Christfulness and Areopagos' meditation project in Norway are but two examples that will be addressed fully in chapter 6).

Weber's famous view on the disenchantment of the world [*Entzauberung der Welt*] will also be applied in my study. Disenchantment is for Weber a central feature of modernity. In *Science as a Vocation* (based on his 1919 lecture), Weber writes: "The fate of our age, with its characteristic rationalization and intellectualization and above all the disenchantment of the

⁵ (Dobbelaere 1987)

⁶ (Hammer 2001, pp. 30-31)

world, is that the ultimate, most sublime values have withdrawn from public life...”⁷ A de-spiritualization or de-mystification of the public sphere is on full display. A central tenet of the modern age, according to Weber, is the belief that there is essentially “no *mysterious, incalculable powers at work*, but rather that one could in principle master everything through *calculation*. (...) One need no longer have recourse to magic in order to control or implore the spirits.”⁸ Weber’s notion of disenchantment can be interpreted as a critique of one of the side-effects of scientific progress and the increased bureaucratization of society – a cold meaninglessness which, at the expense of the existential *why*, locomotives forth in the name of efficiency and the productive *what*. I interpret Weber’s concept of disenchantment in the abovementioned sense.

2.2 Qualitative methods

Qualitative research in religion has as its main aims to understand and interpret religious phenomena in their natural surroundings, and does not just explore the *what*, *when* and *where* like in quantitative research, but also its *how* and *why*. As such, my observations and conclusions will perhaps indicate correlations, but never causation, and must be considered speculative and hypothetical rather than categorical and definitive. Qualitative methods that are used to collect and analyze data can e.g. be ethnographic, case-studies (e.g. fieldwork with interviews and/or observation), or hermeneutical. The latter two methods – i.e. case-studies and hermeneutical approaches – will be used in this dissertation. I will explore the explanatory potential and limitations of these methods, and will in the following evaluate both their strengths and weaknesses.

2.2.1 Mystical Hermeneutics and reflexivity

Hermeneutics is a philosophy of interpretation and also the analysis of the principles of interpretation (i.e. method). A hermeneutic process involves readings that move back and forth between single parts of the text and the horizon of the text, and between the text and its contexts. This moving about is called the hermeneutical circle.⁹

⁷ The quote continues: “...either into the transcendental realm of mystical life or into brotherhood of immediate personal relationships between individuals.” See (Lassman, Velody, and Martins 1989, p. 30)

⁸ (Lassman, Velody, and Martins 1989, 13-14)

⁹ (Stausberg and Engler 2011, p. 275)

Mystical hermeneutics is a term proposed by Kripal, and involves exploring how a text performs what the “mystical” authors want to say, “how they engage in different rhetorics of secrecy to hide or camouflage (...), and how rhetorical occurrences of these mystical meaning events might then occur to the readers of their texts.”¹⁰ In my evaluation of three different contemplative sources, I will use a somewhat similar approach to what Kripal is here describing. I will first read the primary texts, then try out the practices described therein, and then re-read the texts to see if any new insight appear from such a “mystical” hermeneutics. My use of the term differs slightly, then, from Kripal’s usage, as I am rather interested in exploring how the hermeneutical circle – of reading, practicing, re-reading – influences the interpretive process. I found that upon my re-reading, after practicing the contemplative practices, I was more sympathetic to the texts. This is not necessarily wrong, but needs to be treated reflexively, as unrestricted hermeneutical freedom represents a serious limitation to the hermeneutical method, which can lead to bizarre interpretations.

Cultivating a conscious awareness of how the researcher is part of the knowledge production process is what is usually referred to as reflexivity.¹¹ Flood defines reflexivity as “the ability of a researcher, or indeed as a strategy embedded within method, to become aware of the contexts of research and the presuppositions of the research program.”¹² Reflexivity allows the researcher not only to treat things critically and reflect over one’s own possible presuppositions, but also enables the researcher to be critical of the critical evaluation of said presuppositions. Specifically, this means that it can be possible for the researcher to uncover personal biases and hidden agendas concerning research design. It also means that method can move away from the façade of neutrality and objectivity, to a recognition of agency¹³ and contextuality. Reflexivity is related to hermeneutics in the sense that both are abilities of the researcher to become aware of his own biases, and both emphasize the contextual nature of knowledge production. Reflexivity can therefore work as a safeguard against possible exaggerations or hidden agendas in my use of “mystical” hermeneutics.

¹⁰ (Kripal 2001, 8)

¹¹ (Stausberg and Engler 2011, 67)

¹² (Flood 1999, 35)

¹³ (Flood 1999, 38)

2.2.2 Fieldwork – Participant Observation

A significant portion of the source material for this dissertation will be based on my own participation in two 7-week intensive summer courses at Brown University during the summer of 2013. There, I attended two classes: one was called Meditation and the Brain, and focused on recent neuroscientific research; the other was called An Introduction to Contemplative Studies, and focused on mainly Buddhist and Daoists contemplative texts and practices. These courses, being intensive summer courses, held two 3 hour seminars per week. Also, they both included what was called med labs – meaning meditation labs. The med labs entailed going to a nice neutral-looking chapel at 9 am, before the seminars, and meditate there for 1 hour to 1 hour 15 min per session under the guidance of an experienced instructor. Then, a short break would commence followed by the seminar, in which we would go through the textual and historical background for the different meditation/contemplative practices we had just practiced in the med lab. After each med lab, we would write down our reflections about the experiences from the practices and journal our contemplative development. This means that for four days a week, I meditated at least 1 hour, meaning at least 4,5 hours of contemplative practicing per week.

During this study, mainly in 2013, I practiced mostly the mindfulness techniques (two months), while centering prayer and Christfulness practices have been practiced sporadically for a few weeks. In conducting fieldwork of this type, it is important to treat my non-textual source material – i.e. my personal experience with contemplative practice – with a high degree of reflexivity. Therefore, I will be explicit whenever I am referring to insights or opinions based on my personal practice experience. The idea is that my practice¹⁴ will inform and hopefully elucidate my interpretive approaches to the source material. The strength of this approach involves gaining an insider-perspective on phenomena usually relegated to texts or phenomenological analysis and bracketing of other peoples' experiences. The weakness or rather danger of this method could be an unreflexive apologetic development.

¹⁴ Or technical mysticism, as I call experimenting with contemplative practices. See chapter 4.4

2.2.3 Evaluating Good Research – Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to the extent of consistency and stability of the research data, whereas validity is the extent to which the phenomenon being studied is addressed properly in research.¹⁵ These terms are, in other words, criteria of criticism and excellence. Validity raises the question of whether we can be sure that we are researching what we think we are researching – whether the indicators we use (our methodology) accurately reflects the concepts it is supposed to reflect. Concerns for reliability questions whether the findings would be different if the data had been collected from different source material (e.g. if I used interviews instead of hermeneutical analysis) and whether another researcher evaluating the same data using the same theories would come to the same conclusions as myself. Further questions regarding validity could be whether the findings would relate to people's ordinary lives outside the confines of the study itself (e.g. whether Christfulness is relevant for not just practitioners mentioned in the sources, but for other Christians too); whether the findings can be generalized across the social contexts studied (e.g. whether the technical similarities between centering prayer and mindfulness can withstand academic scrutiny); and whether the data is sufficiently relevant for the object of study¹⁶ (do the three contemplative practices in this study provide enough data to construct an anatomy of contemplative practice?).

Briefly, it should be noted that the concepts of reliability and validity have been criticized because of their implicit linkage to (post) positivistic views of methodology¹⁷ and science, and failure to recognize “the situated and co-constructed nature of truth.”¹⁸ Critical voices from ethnic and feminist perspectives emphasize concepts such as accountability, dialogue, caring and reflexivity as better standards for assessing good research.¹⁹ According to this critique, un-reflexive criteria of excellence in pursuing norms of objectivity can easily (and without knowing it) support the status quo and those in a position of advantage, at the expense of the disadvantaged. A famous proponent of this feminist critique maintains that instead, the social researcher should ask passionately, analyze critically and disseminate empoweringly.²⁰ Reflexivity is again highlighted as a remedy for methodological shortcomings and weak research designs.

¹⁵ (Stausberg and Engler 2011, 7-20)

¹⁶ (Stausberg and Engler 2011, 8)

¹⁷ (Zammito 2004)

¹⁸ (Stausberg and Engler 2011, 9)

¹⁹ (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 24)

²⁰ (Sprague 2005, 199-200) and (Stausberg and Engler 2011, 55)

3 Historical Overview of Research on Contemplative Technologies

3.1 The Academic Study of Asceticism

Asceticism has often been used synonymously with negative connotatives like self-torture, religious madness, spiritual masochism, etc. – especially during and after the Enlightenment. Recent research however, has challenged the earlier predominating negative view of ascetic practice. Indeed, the academic study of asceticism is relatively new. Still to this day, there is no definitive cross-cultural work on asceticism. Asceticism is a term that, like religion, has proven hard to define by scholars and researchers. It comes from the Greek *askesis*, meaning “training, exercise, practice,” and denotes a form of inner training one subjects oneself to through a variety of regulatory attention practices, and often also abstentions from activities and obligations of the social sphere (like reproduction, normal food, etc.). Just as with research on mysticism and contemplation, the academic study of asceticism has seen a marked increase of interest over the last two decades. The perspectives range from those focusing on asceticism as self-denial, self-sacrifice and pathological self-scrutiny as the essential factors (negative), to those seeing ascetic practice as being in the service of liberation, empowerment and spiritualization (positive).²¹ Interestingly, we can find the same thinkers on both sides of the discussion, some starting out on the negative side of the spectrum, then ending up on the more affirmative side later on in their research.²²

On the negative side, Nietzsche stands out, even though his seemingly contradictory views can be interpreted as being juxtaposed and coherent. On the one hand, he directly discusses the meaning of what he calls the “ascetic Ideal” in *the Genealogy of Morals*, in its third essay, basically arguing that this ideal is constituted by a pathological denial of self and the world, while still being the highest form of will to power. On the other hand, as both biographer Walter Kaufmann and Tyler Roberts note, Nietzsche himself was an ascetic, and wrote

²¹For examples of this more positive understanding of asceticism, see (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995) and (Sloterdijk 2013)

²² Foucault is a good example of this, which will be briefly illustrated below.

sympathetic lines about asceticism on several occasions.²³ Further, Roberts illustrates some other critical voices and argues that

since the Enlightenment, it [*asceticism*] has become a pivotal term for comprehensive critiques of Western culture: Weber finds in the inner-worldly asceticism of Puritanism the mechanism of modernity's 'iron cage'; Foucault argues that the monastic cell is reinstituted in the modern prison and factory; feminist philosopher Mary Daly identifies asceticism as the 'sadospirituality' with which patriarchy has formed the world's major religious traditions.²⁴

Hence, it is easy to see how negative connotations to askesis have been prevalent among scholars over the last century.

Of the more positive and (in some cases) recent contributions, asceticism has been viewed as diversely as: the most potent form of will to power humanity has yet discovered and “a gymnastics of the will”²⁵ (Nietzsche); a “methodical procedure for achieving religious salvation” (Weber); a self-forming activity and the resulting changes that one makes to oneself in order to become an ethical subject (Foucault); a structure of compensation, “‘the cultural element’ in culture, and (...) any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification” (Harpham); as “performances designed to inaugurate an alternative culture, to enable different social relations, and to create a new identity” (Valantasis)²⁶; and as a “self-doubling,” as an inner secession through which the ascetic self separates itself from the former life of norms and habit, creating a new subjectivity by means of exercises²⁷, and as “the methods of mental and physical practicing by which humans from the most diverse cultures have attempted to optimize their cosmic and immunological status in the face of vague risks of living and acute certainties of death”²⁸ (Sloterdijk).

Weber's thoughts on asceticism are part of his sociological theory and understanding of the history of economics and the rise of capitalism – accordingly, he devised two categories of asceticism: world-rejecting (salvation is achieved by rejecting the world) and innerworldly

²³ Nietzsche's desire for a rebranding of asceticism can be seen here: “I also want to make asceticism natural again; in place of the aim of denial, the aim of strengthening; (...) an experiment with adventure and arbitrary dangers.” (Roberts 1996, p. 406). His deep admiration for asceticism is best expressed in the following quote: “The most spiritual human beings, as the *strongest*, find their happiness where others would find their destruction; in severity towards themselves and others, in attempting; their joy lies in self-constraint; with them asceticism becomes nature, need, instinct. They consider the hard task a privilege (...).” (Roberts 1996, p. 426)

²⁴ (Roberts 1996, 403)

²⁵ (Roberts 1996, 405)

²⁶ (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995, 544-551)

²⁷ (Halsall and Brown 2013, 243)

²⁸ (Sloterdijk 2013, 10 & 233)

(salvation is achieved through participation in the world, but while rejecting the institutions of the world) asceticism.²⁹ Foucault, throughout and especially towards the final years of his life, would increasingly turn his attention toward the importance of ascetic practice and its relation to the formation of the self. Indeed, he even reconceived his original project on sexuality as part of a “general history of the ‘techniques of the self.’”³⁰

Harpham and Valantasis offer more refined conceptions. Their notions of asceticism include recognition of the social dimension of ascetic practice, as well as performativity and agency in the context of repetition. Flood makes the case that asceticism is always religious, that it must have a sacred origin (either deeply engrained in tradition or ritual, or radically opposed to it, as a reaction), and defines it as an “erosion of individuality through the act of will”³¹ practiced within a religious tradition. Indeed, some of the most central issues in research gravitate around whether asceticism is against, of, beyond, a transformer of, or having a mutual paradoxical relationship with, – culture. Kaelber argues that these five categories of asceticism are helpful in comprehending it as a socio-cultural phenomenon, although only for heuristic purposes.³² Kaelber’s five-fold typology will be helpful when I later analyze the case studies in part III, as I argue that they can all be seen in the fifth sense – i.e. as practices that (ideally) work as transformers of culture.

3.2 The Academic Study of Mysticism

For an informed study of what contemplative practices might be, I need to survey the vast research literature on mysticism. “Mystical” and “contemplative technique” is sometimes used interchangeably, so it is useful to investigate what mysticism is. What I give an account of here must necessarily be limited to examples most relevant for my project, which is to find out what might define a contemplative practice.

²⁹ (Weber and Aut 1963, p. 164) Weber’s conception of innerworldly asceticism helped him explore the relationship “between the development of the work force, the valuation of wealth and material good in the Protestant Reformation; the Protestant concept of a vocation to live in the world (as opposed to those Catholic monks who withdrew from the world); and the doctrine of predestination (..)” (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995, p. 545) and also (Weber and Tawney 1930, p. 132)

³⁰ (Foucault et al. 1988, p. 8). This is especially noticeable in his later works (Foucault et al. 1988), (Foucault 1986) and (Foucault et al. 2005). These later works are part of a project in which Foucault’s aim is to establish a form of ‘non dogmatic normativity’ compatible with ethical freedom.

³¹ (Flood 2004, p. 212)

³² (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995, p. 324)

“Mysticism” and “mystical experience” is a Western construction. The noun “mysticism” first appeared in the middle of the 18th century, seemingly at that time to disparage religious fanatics in France³³. Before that time, it was mainly used as the adjective *mystical* in mystical theology. As one of the intellectual languages of power changed in the turn to the 20th century from theology to psychology, mysticism was first studied cross-culturally by William James, the American philosopher-psychologist. He published *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902, and argued that the collective religious experiences of individuals were at the heart of all religions. Further, he argued that a subset of religious experience, mystical experiences, could be identified by the presence of four marks: 1) *ineffability* (they defy description), 2) *noetic quality* (“states of knowledge full of significance and importance”); 3) *transiency* (they end quickly and cannot be sustained for long); and 4) *passivity* (the feeling of suspension of one’s own will, even when one has taken steps to cultivate a mystical state)³⁴. Importantly, James goes on to identify another crucial element: the transformative element of mystical experience. One is never the same after, according to James³⁵. A Jamesian perennialist view of mystical experience as universal and similar cross-culturally predominates mysticism research until 1978, when it is challenged by Steven Katz³⁶. A debate between so-called perennialists and contextualists as to the true nature of mystical experience has been ongoing since³⁷.

As to specific research into contemplative/mystical techniques, Eliade stands out with his analyses of yogic and shamanistic practices³⁸. Daniel Brown provides an excellent typology of meditative states based on a cross-cultural study, identifying six major stages of practice: “1) Preliminary Ethical training, 2) Preliminary Mind/Body training, 3) Concentration With Support, 4) Concentration Without Support, 5) Ordinary Insight Meditation, 6) Extraordinary Mind and Enlightenment.”³⁹ I will come back to this typology in chapter 8, in my analysis of the source material. Other studies, often informed by personal practice, include Katsuki Sekida’s masterpiece on Zen training⁴⁰, and the more recent research articles and cultural

³³ (Wulff 2014, 369)

³⁴ (James 2008 [1902], 267)

³⁵ (James 2008 [1902], 299)

³⁶ (Katz 1978)

³⁷ The main proponents in the different camps being Katz on the contextualist side: (Katz 1983), (Katz 1992), (Katz 2000), versus Forman on the perennialist side: (Forman 1990) and (Forman 1998).

³⁸ (Eliade 1969) and (Eliade 1964).

³⁹ (Brown 1986, 223)

⁴⁰ (Sekida 1975)

histories of meditation edited by Halvor Eifring⁴¹. Eifring's definition of meditation as "attention-based techniques for inner transformation"⁴² will be developed further in chapter 4.

There are, finally, a growing number of neuroscientists who are studying techniques of attention-regulation through the methods of neuroscience. This change of focus among researchers illustrates how neuroscience has replaced psychology as one of the dominant discourses of explicating mystical experiences and techniques. So how can neuroscientists study religious and contemplative-mystical experiences?

First, the neuroscientist can study the relationship between the electrical charges in the brain (measured by electroencephalography, EEG) and meditative states. Second, he can utilize brain imaging techniques to map out the cerebral functions during religious experiences, which has been done in the past during various motor, behavioural and cognitive tasks.⁴³ Third, some neuropsychologists have tried to construct neuropsychological models of spiritual experience, examining the role of particular parts of the brain such as the temporal lobes, the frontal lobes, the thalamus, the parietal lobe, the basal ganglia, and also "the autonomic nervous system, or some integrated function of a number of brain structures."⁴⁴ All these models can be illustrative for studying religious phenomena. A recently new interdisciplinary field of study, Neurotheology, provides an accessible introduction to the ways of studying religious phenomena neuroscientifically. Neurotheology is a "unique field of scholarship and investigation that seeks to understand the relationship between the brain and theology, and more broadly between the mind and religion."⁴⁵ Although the field has been accused of theological dishonesty and a not-uncommon Christian apologetic bias constantly found in the field of "religion (or Christianity) and science", Newberg, who is one of the more serious neurotheological representatives, makes a convincing case for the seriousness and the academic scope of this incipient field by avoiding the common biases just mentioned in his great book, *Principles of Neurotheology* (2012).

Neuroimaging techniques such as single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), positron emission tomography (PET), and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) can all contribute to explore cerebral function during contemplative experiences, for example

⁴¹ (Eifring 2010), (Eifring 2013), (Eifring 2014)

⁴² (Eifring 2014, 1)

⁴³ (Newberg 2010, 168-169)

⁴⁴ (Newberg 2010, 169)

⁴⁵ (Newberg 2010, 1)

during prayer or meditation. These imaging techniques can allow, and has indeed allowed, for the uncovering of complex neural networks and phenomenological relationships. PET-imaging shows that “the themes of experimental phenomena are correlated with the functions of the parts of the brain most metabolically active.”⁴⁶ Michael Persinger, in his research evaluated by Anne Runehov, utilizes PET-imaging, with the intention of observing parts of the brain that have changed neural activity, compared to baseline (starting point), during some experience⁴⁷. Functional brain imaging techniques may be extremely useful in detecting neurophysiological changes associated with most spiritual practices (at least the ones involving some kind of activation, meaning most of them) and their concomitant experiences.⁴⁸ “PET and SPECT can also be utilized to explore a wide variety of neurotransmitters systems within the brain such as dopamine, serotonin, or endorphins.”⁴⁹ Despite all that these techniques can show, we must always keep in mind that they, like all techniques and methods for intellectual enquiry, are limited. These specific imaging techniques are limited in the sense that they can interfere with the normal environment of the contemplative practice, as being confined to an uncomfortable narrow scanner and suffering exposure to high-pitch noise could adversely affect the subject’s ability to “perform” his practice, thus weakening the experiment from the start.

Other approaches for studying religious phenomena with the tools of neuroscience include models which focus on specific parts and functionalisms of the brain. One area of focus is the temporal lobes, referred to by scholars as the “God module”, or “the seat” of spiritual experiences.⁵⁰ The temporal lobes house the limbic system structures such as the amygdala and hippocampus that are the seat of emotional responses and also play a key role in memory. Additionally, the temporal lobe is involved in cognition and language – therefore, seeing as spiritual experiences more often than not are expressed very emotionally and elicit intense sensory experiences, plus being dependant (at least to a large extent) upon language, the temporal lobe could very likely be one of the connectors of the human brain with spiritual

⁴⁶ “For this purpose, the parts of the body that are to be diagnosed are injected with a radioactive tracer. The tracer is a glucose analogue agent... A computer screen shows the metabolically active parts of the brain in colors.” (Runehov 2004, 71)

⁴⁷ “However, (...) Persinger did not use neuroimaging technology to study the neural activity that correlates with religious experiences, for example, those religious experiences obtained through meditation. Instead he studied neural activity associated with schizophrenic hallucinations and epileptic seizure experiences. He maintains that ‘there is nothing unusual about studying the exception [epileptic seizure experiences] in order to find the rule [the neural activity that generates such (religious) experiences.]’.” (Runehov 2004, 70-71)

⁴⁸ (Newberg 2010, 169)

⁴⁹ (Newberg 2010, 169)

⁵⁰ (Newberg 2010, 170)

experiences⁵¹. Another area of focus, the twofold autonomic nervous system – the sympathetic, which mediates arousal and excitation, and the parasympathetic, which mediates calmness and quiescence⁵² – can contribute to different experiences. Blood pressure, body metabolism and heart rate are processes regulated by the autonomic nervous system. The two arms of this system – the sympathetic and the parasympathetic – could explain some of the paradoxicality of certain spiritual experiences, such as feeling overwhelming calmness simultaneously with significant alertness, shown by recent studies on the effects of two different types of meditation techniques on the nervous system.⁵³

3.3 The Participatory Turn

In *The Participatory Turn: spirituality, mysticism, religious studies* (2008), Jorge Ferrer and Jacob Sherman present a coherent and detailed analysis of the contemporary climate and trends within the field of Religious Studies. They argue that the impact of the linguistic turn – although great and far-reaching – is not sufficient when it comes to explicating certain central questions within the field, especially pertaining to the study of mysticism and spiritual practice. By challenging various assumptions related to the linguistic turn and its limitations, they intend to prove the need for a move “beyond what Jürgen Habermas calls the ‘linguistification of the sacred.’”⁵⁴

The linguistic paradigm is characterized by an insistence that the study of religion should focus on communicative data like signs and meanings found in religious texts, practices, and worldviews. Ferrer elaborates:

To “linguistify” the sacred means to subvert its transcendental authority in the Heavens and bring the legitimization of its cognitive and normative claims down to Earth, that is, to the intersubjective space constituted by communicative exchanges among rational human beings. In the disenchanted world of post/modernity, the sacred has been detranscendentalized, relativized, contextualized, and diversified but, most fundamentally, assimilated to linguistic expression.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Experiments done by Wilder Penfield, although controversial and inconclusive because it proved hard to replicate, nevertheless managed to elicit a number of strange experiences (strong visual and auditory experiences, dream-like states, complex hallucinations, etc.) by stimulating certain parts of the temporal lobe on patients during surgery. (Newberg 2010, 170-171)

⁵² (Newberg 2010, 173)

⁵³ (Newberg 2010, 173)

⁵⁴ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 2)

⁵⁵ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 6)

Despite comprising an extremely diverse family of different approaches,⁵⁶ the linguistic turn is deemed too narrow, because embracing its methodology means effectively abandoning all efforts to evaluate the epistemic status of “private consciousness or suprasensible experiences of the real, the sacred, the holy,” although it also involves, more positively, “approaching the study of religion as the examination of both public religious languages and the relationship to either the sensible world or to other elements of the linguistic framework.”⁵⁷ Ferrer and Sherman examine seven areas within the field of Religious Studies wherein they believe evidence for the need to surpass the linguistic paradigm becomes clear. These seven areas are: (1) the postcolonial revaluation of emic epistemological frameworks; (2) the postmodern and feminist emphasis on embodiment and sacred immanence; (3) the resacralization of language; (4) the “pragmatic turn” in contemporary philosophy; (5) the renewed interest in the study of lived spirituality; (6) the question of religious truth in post-metaphysical thinking; and (7) the irreducibility of religious pluralism.⁵⁸

Regarding (1), it is argued that postmodern critiques of the Western scientific-philosophical metanarrative as “onto-theological”⁵⁹ means that Western epistemologies – with their long-assumed Enlightenment-biased belief in the epistemic superiority of critical rationality – deserve to be treated with critical suspicion. The epistemic hegemony of the Western Enlightenment project and its associated terms are thus put into question. Further, some scholars argue that insider (traditional) and outsider (scholarly) narratives of religion could be viewed as competing narratives, as neither side can claim a priori epistemological privilege.⁶⁰ Emic epistemologies can not only challenge our (inevitable) cultural biases, but can also raise new questions and stimulate fresh methodologies that should not be discounted from the get-go. For example, in the study of mysticism, both King and Forman have argued that certain

⁵⁶ Ferrer and Sherman divide these into *analytical* (epistemology, philosophy of language, etc.), *interpretive* (hermeneutical approaches like phenomenology, comparativism, historicism, constructivism) and *postmodern* (poststructuralism, Derridean deconstruction, gender studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonialism). See (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 4-6)

⁵⁷ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 3-4)

⁵⁸ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 7-34)

⁵⁹ “The postmodern account of Western thinking as ontotheological is rooted in a writings of the two prophets of postmodernity: Friedrich Nietzsche and Heidegger. On the one hand, it stems from Nietzsche’s equation of “the death of God” with the collapse of the possibility of objective truth, including scientific truth – what is “truth,” after all, if there is not a complete and absolute God’s eye view of the world? On the other hand, “onto-theology” is most explicitly associated with Heidegger’s critique of Western tradition that confuses the thought of being as such (ontos) with the entitative notion of the highest being (theos) and equates both with rationality (logos). Heidegger famously charged that such ontotheology is not only metaphysically destitute because it is incapable of really thinking being, but also religiously bankrupt because it gives us a God before whom one can “neither dance, nor sing, nor pray.” See (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 56)

⁶⁰ (Flood 1999, pp. 139-142)

contemplative Asian epistemologies (Buddhist and Hindu in this case) challenge Katz's abovementioned assertion that "accepting the culturally mediated nature of the contemplative path entails the impossibility of nonconceptual, unmediated mystical experiences."⁶¹

Recognizing the linguistically constituted nature of ordinary experience – and consequently, of knowledge – does not mean that one necessarily must behold to the idea that all knowledge is procured this way. Indeed, as we shall see in part II, several contemplative epistemologies emphasize the exact need for the dismantling of such constructive mechanisms, through the tool of contemplative practice. Thus, while contemplative practice might start out as a linguistic tool (as self-instruction can be seen as a form of private language game), several contemplative practices aim to decrease and totally silence all conceptual movements and forms of external stimuli by a process of intense interiorization and willed focus. The revaluation of emic epistemologies should not, therefore, be excluded. Challenging hegemonic claims of the linguistic paradigm, proponents of the participatory turn argue that deeper understanding of alternative epistemologies (which emphasize not only discursive reason, but also intuition, meditation, contemplation, etc.) may "be critical in the assessment of many religious knowledge claims."⁶²

In terms of (2), there is a discernable re-focus on the centrality of the body and the sensuous in Religious Studies, demonstrated by Kripal's quote: "If there is one universal in the history of religions, it is the human body and its physiological shaping of religious practice and experience."⁶³ In relation to (1) and (2) we also have (5), the renewed interest in the study of spirituality, where the two most distinct methodological features are self-implication and transformation. Self-implication should be encouraged and recognized as a source of honest scholarship instead of methodological suspicion and weakness. Including scholars of spirituality especially, a number of Western scholars⁶⁴ are "coming out" as spiritual practitioners. An example of this can be seen in the rise of Contemplative Studies in North-America, which currently is in its formative stages. As shall be discussed in part III regarding meditation research, it is an open secret that nearly all academic researchers of meditation today also are practitioners, even though not everyone are equally clear about communicating this. One reason could be the supposedly contaminating effect strong personal involvement is

⁶¹(Ferrer and Sherman 2008, p. 8) Specifically, see (King 1999, pp. 175-186), (Forman 1989) and more generally (Forman 1990)

⁶² (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, p. 11)

⁶³ (Kripal 2007, p. 139)

⁶⁴ Some examples are Robert A. Orsi, Jeffrey Kripal and Harold Roth

thought to be able to exert on academic objectivity. However, as Orsi has pointed out, Religious Studies academics are haunted by their own religious histories.⁶⁵ He continues by pointing out “if sexual relations in the field is the great taboo subject of anthropology, our own religious histories is the great taboo of religious studies.”⁶⁶ The duo of active engagement necessary to study the lived and highly personal aspects of religion like spirituality and mysticism, combined with the critical detachment from lived religion can together bring about not only informative, but transformative results – this transformative element, I will argue, is one the most important factors of contemplative practice, and cannot be as comprehensively addressed through the methods of the linguistic paradigm alone.

One example illustrating the importance of transformation is whether some kind of personal engagement, like overcoming a mental addiction or developing contemplative competences (like stronger concentration or a more open, flexible mind), might be required for the assessment of certain religious truth claims.⁶⁷ The issue of so-called ineffability comes to the fore here, as many contemplative practices emphasize the need to develop unique competences outside the structure of linguistic rationality (see part II). The participatory turn, then, sets out to solve the tension that exists “between the linguistification of the sacred and the emphasis on the nonlinguistic that characterizes important scholarship in religion.”⁶⁸ Proponents of participatory approaches argue for an enactive understanding of religious phenomena, insights, and experiences as co-created events. Ferrer and Sherman suggest that religious and spiritual phenomena are participatory insofar as they can appear as a result of every conceivable human attribute. Participatory modes of enactment are related to “bringing-forth,” a central aspect of *techne* elaborated by Heidegger (which will be discussed in chapter 4). Participatory knowing is creative, transformative, performative, as opposed to being objective and representational.

For now, we need only concern ourselves with two crucial imperatives of the participatory turn. The first is a call to “move *beyond objectivism and subjectivism toward the recognition of the interpretive and therefore largely constituted but nevertheless immediate nature of spiritual and religious knowledge.*”⁶⁹ The second imperative concerns the difference between

⁶⁵ «The halls of religious studies departments are thick with ghosts – the minister father, the tongue-speaking mother, the nuns and priests who taught us, the born-again brother.”(Ferrer and Sherman 2008, p. 22)

⁶⁶ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 22)

⁶⁷ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 26)

⁶⁸ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 34)

⁶⁹ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, 36)

good and bad scholarship. Ferrer and Sherman propose that the divide between weak and strong scholarship should not be whether one follows Western or non-Western epistemologies – but rather be “between approaches that lead to *radically empirical intersubjectively testable outcomes and/or discernible pragmatic consequences* and those which do not.”⁷⁰

Two examples shall suffice as “proofs” as to the ongoing success and reality of the participatory turn – namely the abovementioned rise of Contemplative Studies in North-America, and the so-called anthropotechnic turn espoused by Peter Sloterdijk in his major work *You Must Change Your Life* (2013). Starting with the latter, there is Sloterdijk who maintains that religion and religious expressions are nothing much other than misunderstood mental practice systems⁷¹. Further, he argues that the imperative of today – even more so than in the past – is the call to change one’s life and transcend, overcome, and transform oneself.

Contemplative Studies is a developing interdisciplinary new-born academic field in North America which is dedicated to the critical study of contemplative states of experience. In various incarnations, it is taught at Ivy League universities like Brown and Stanford, and also at Rice, University of Virginia, and at New York University. At Brown, there has since October 2014 been a Contemplative Studies concentration, which require interested students to complete classes both within the humanities and the natural sciences. At Brown, Contemplative Studies is an attempt to:

- 1) Identify the varieties of contemplative experiences of which human beings are capable;
- 2) Find meaningful scientific explanations for them;
- 3) Cultivate first-person knowledge of them;
- 4) Critically assess their nature and significance.⁷²

In other words, it takes on and partially reflects some of the tension-areas mentioned above by the participatory turn proponents, and tries to solve these by applying new methodology – significantly, the combination of traditional third-person approaches mixed with more creative, innovate, critical first-person approaches. Again at Brown, contemplative experiences are studied from several perspectives:

- Science: particularly psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science, and clinical medicine

⁷⁰ (Ferrer and Sherman 2008, p.10)

⁷¹ (Sloterdijk 2013, 1-15)

⁷² (Roth 2011, 32)

- Humanities: contemplative dimensions of literature, philosophy, and religion;
- The creative arts: the role contemplation in both the creation and appreciation of the visual and fine arts, creative writing, and in the various performing arts of dance, drama, and music.⁷³

The critique of standard approaches to studying religion by proponents for Contemplative Studies also resemble the critique from Ferrer and Sherman.⁷⁴ It should be noted that the participatory turn does not disavow the use of research methods which goes under the rubric of the linguistic paradigm. The point is rather that these methodologies alone seem insufficient to properly investigate, explicate and uncover the many conundrums related to contemplative practice. Therefore, I will use methods both from the linguistic and the participatory approaches when dealing with my source material in this study.

⁷³ (Roth 2011, 32)

⁷⁴ See e.g. Roth's critique of what he calls Eurocentric attitudes, cognitive imperialism, and the historicist reductionism and retreat from serious study of religious experience – all prevalent within Religious Studies today. (Roth 2011)

4 Religion as *techne*

Techne (...) reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie before us (...)

– Martin Heidegger⁷⁵

No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; neither can one learn the art of living, the *techne tou bon*, without an *askesis* which must be taken as a training of oneself by oneself; this was one of the traditional principles to which the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, the Cynics had for a long time attributed great importance.

– Michel Foucault⁷⁶

In this chapter, I will discuss and use the Greek term *techne* as a lens for understanding religion in general, and particularly practical religious expressions and phenomena, namely contemplative practices. Briefly, one limitation should be repeated: the ritualistic aspect of *techne*, which can be seen, e.g., in the magical-theurgical currents of Neoplatonism in especially late antiquity, or through the influence and spread of power-ritualistic Tantra a little bit later from India to Tibet and further⁷⁷, will not be dealt with in this dissertation. For the sake of focus and space, I will exclusively focus on the contemplative aspects of *techne*.

In the following, I will briefly outline some major tenets of the conceptual evolution the term has gone through, and its relation to two other central Greek words in philosophy, namely *episteme* and *phronesis*. Afterwards, I will present two theories that are instrumental in my conception of the technification thesis – von Hügel’s theory and philosophy of religion, and the subjectivization thesis of Hellaas and Woodhead. Then, I will explicate the meaning of, and the links between, the following three key concepts: technification, transformation and practice. Through this, I will work out a definition of contemplative practice. Lastly, I will show how *techne* can be especially illustrative and enlightening as an analytical tool in the study of mysticism, in the form of what I call technical mysticism. By the end of the chapter, I

⁷⁵ (Heidegger 1954, 255)

⁷⁶ (Foucault 1978, 364)

⁷⁷ See (Tanaseanu-Döbler 2013) And (Samuel 2008)

hope to have shown that *techne* is an inherent aspect of all contemplative practice in particular, and most religious practice in general.

4.1 A Brief History of the Concept of *Techne*

Techne is an ancient expression originating in Greek antiquity. In English, it is normally translated as either “art” or “craft.” The Greek *technikon* relates to that which belongs to *techne*. Thus, our contemporary words technique and technology are derived from *techne*. As both Heidegger and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy can tell us, there are especially two important factors to consider when it comes to the meaning of this word. First, the name does not only signify the skills and activities of the craftsman, “but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Techne* belongs to bringing-forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poietic.”⁷⁸ In his famous essay concerning technology, Heidegger stresses that the essence of technology lies in revealing, and not in its instrumentality, not in its function as a mere means to an end (this is not to say that Heidegger does not recognize instrumentality as an important aspect of technology). Second, it is important to note that since the earliest of days until at least Plato, *techne* has been linked to the word *episteme*. *Episteme* is usually translated as “knowledge,” and both words are names for knowing in the widest sense. “They mean to be entirely at home in something, to understand and be expert in it.”⁷⁹ Therefore, the seemingly contemporary distinction between *episteme* as exclusively part of the theoretical domain, opposed to *techne* as exclusively part of the practical domain (think of the taken-for-granted dichotomy between pure theory and practice) – does not necessarily hold true at all when we take into account the usage of *techne* by the Greek philosophers of antiquity, especially the pre-Socratics.

It is not until Aristotle that we first see an attempt at distinguishing *techne* and *episteme* systematically, even though Plato discusses *techne* in several of his dialogues.⁸⁰ Still, even the great systematiser Aristotle uses these words interchangeably⁸¹, and sometimes refers to *techne* or “craft” as also *episteme* or “knowledge because it is a practice grounded in an account – something involving theoretical understanding.”⁸² Significantly, Aristotle makes an important distinction between *techne* and *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is often translated as practical

⁷⁸ (Heidegger 1954, 255)

⁷⁹ (Heidegger 1954, 255)

⁸⁰ E.g. in *Charmides*, *Gorgias*, and the *Republic*.

⁸¹ For more on Aristotle’s lack of consistency in his usage of the term, see (Dunne 1993, 319-326 specifically, and pp. 237-274 and 315-356 for wider discussions.)

⁸² (Parry 2014, section 3)

judgement or practical knowledge. Both *techne* and *phronesis* are for Aristotle considered as rational powers which give us “two quite distinct modes of practical knowledge.”⁸³ *Techne* is associated with making, while *phronesis* is associated with acting. Aristotle argues that acting and making are not the same thing, because *techne* (i.e. the reasoned capacity to make) is aiming for something separate from the act of making, i.e., the product (the construction-process of a table or house is not the same as the finished table or house, and both the act of making and its final product are something separate from the craftsman). There is, in other words, a distinction between the technite’s acting (production) and his intended goal (the product). In contrast, *phronesis* (i.e. the reasoned capacity to act) “characterizes a person who knows how to live well (...). It is acquired and deployed not in the making of any product separate from oneself but rather in one’s actions with one’s fellows.”⁸⁴

The Stoics, however, further develop the notion of *techne* and its relation to *phronesis*. Chrysippus said that practical judgment (*phronesis*) is a kind of *techne* concerning things having to do with life, and Zeno refers to a *techne* that can cure the diseases of the soul⁸⁵. Zeno believed that virtue is practical knowledge (i.e. *phronesis*) in various forms⁸⁶, and according to Sextus, *phronesis* provides a *techne* concerning life, seeing as *phronesis* is knowledge (*episteme*) of the good and the evil. *Techne* can thus understood be seen as the art or craft of life. The ultimate ideal of Stoic philosophy, the sage-philosopher, with perfect insight into the nature of good and evil, reality and the human condition, is evident in this line of thinking. The sage ideal is that of a master craftsman, who is flexible yet wise enough to adapt to every different situation in life with the appropriate response. Such a master craftsman is, according to Stoic thinking, capable of “crafting” or “shaping” his own interior life.⁸⁷ The Stoics also borrowed from the great Aristotelian commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias, who coined the term *stochastic techne*. Stochastic are “the sorts of *techne* whose task is to try everything possible to achieve their goal, the realization of that goal being

⁸³ (Dunne 1993, 244)

⁸⁴ (Dunne 1993, 244)

⁸⁵ (Parry 2014, section 4)

⁸⁶ “When *phronesis* deals with what is owed to others it is justice; when it deals with what should be chosen it is moderation; when it deals with what must be endured it is courage. In all these definitions Zeno means *phronesis* to be knowledge (*episteme*).” (Parry 2014, section 4)

⁸⁷ Some would say that “accepting” the interior life, rather than crafting it, would be a better description of the Stoic view. However, the idea that all Stoics are strict determinists is a somewhat simplification of the matter. For the sake focus, I will not go into depth about Stoic debates concerning free will and determinism here, but will instead recommend the following work to interested readers: (Long 1971, 173-199)

subject to change.”⁸⁸ This was a response to the problem that *technai* not always achieve their goals, so Alexander divided the *technai* “into ones which achieve their ends by definite steps and those which cannot.”⁸⁹ In this way, the Stoic conception of *techne* paved the way for “the powerful idea that the excellent human life, and happiness, is the same thing as performing in an artful way, striving for life of natural satisfactions, but actually finding ultimate value in the way one strives.”⁹⁰

There are two crucial components similar to all the different understandings of *techne* just described. The first is the central insight Heidegger espoused – namely the revelatory nature of *techne*. *Techne* is a creative endeavor, not just in terms of physical creation, but internally as well. It is about creating or revealing something that will not appear on its own, but requires on our part some mode of participation and enactment. Second, *techne* is about the artful and knowledge-based combination and harmonization of life’s contradistinctions and numerous occasions of unexpected challenge and pandemonium, as well as the more mundane trivialities of daily life. Said differently, *techne* can be seen as a craft or art of life, a form of knowledge and practical judgment that is not purely theoretical, but instead intrinsically participatory. It works as an intermediate between the practical and the theoretical; a hub which initiates a movement from the particular to the general, establishing a link between the concrete and the formless. To use a Hügelian term, it is the skill and the ability that helps us tackle “multiplicity within unity.” Both of the most central aspects of *techne* are thus participatory and enactive. To relate this to my technification thesis, I will now turn to von Hügel’s philosophy of religion. The participatory elements will be discussed in the following two sections in relation to the technification of religion.

4.2 Friedrich von Hügel’s Philosophy of Religion – The Three Elements of Religion

Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925) was, although largely forgotten today, one of the most learned men of his time. A lay intellectual of sorts, he was an influential Catholic thinker of his day and a Christian apologist, friend of Ernst Troeltsch, pen-pal and correspondent with William James on mysticism, and the spiritual mentor of Evelyn Underhill. Von Hügel

⁸⁸ (Parry 2014, section 5)

⁸⁹ (Parry 2014, section 5)

⁹⁰ (Parry 2014, section 4)

authored one of the greatest masterpieces of serious enquiry into mysticism, namely *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and her Friends* (1908), in which he developed a more wholesome and integrative view on mysticism than his friend James. In this his magnum opus, Hügel anticipated upcoming debates on mysticism (some of which are still ongoing)⁹¹ and combined a variety of genres over the duration of the two volumes it comprises⁹². This, in addition to the Baron's Germanic style of writing, makes it a somewhat challenging, yet extremely rewarding read. According to Hügel, all religions carry three interrelated symbiotic elements that constantly battle each other for dominance and survival, each being necessary for the long-lasting fruition of a religion. For Hügel, religion is the tripartite interplay⁹³ between "the historical-institutional element related to sense and memory (the Petrine dimension of Christianity), the analytical-speculative element related to reason (the Pauline dimension)", and finally the most crucial component, "the intuitive-emotional element related to will and action (the Johannine dimension)"⁹⁴. These three modalities or elements of religion are expressed as Institutionalism, Intellectualism, and Mysticism. These can of course be viewed as different sources of authority, and the reader might notice a resemblance to Weber's three types of legitimate rule, namely traditional, legal-rational and charismatic.⁹⁵ It is important to note, though, that Hügel's work came out first in 1908, whereas Weber's abovementioned essay was written sometime between 1917

⁹¹ The two best examples are (i) his implicit critique of James' exclusive emphasis on the private, personal and mystical side of religion at the expense of the institutional and social dimension (Hügel was one of the first to explicitly point this out to James in a letter from 1909), and (ii) Hügel's recognition that "historically, logically and psychologically mysticism is always mediated and so to an extent is secondary to the historical, traditional and institutional elements." (Kelly 1983, 206) This is expressed by Hügel throughout the book, but maybe most specifically here: "Never has religion been purely and entirely individual; always has it been, as truly and necessarily, social and institutional, traditional and historical." (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 59), and here: "Now the tendency of a soul, when once awake to this necessary freshness and interiority of feeling with regard to God's and her own actions, will again be towards an impoverishing oneness. It will now tend to shrink away from the External Institutional altogether. *For though it cannot but have experienced the fact that it was by contact with this External that, like unto Antaeus at his contact with mother Earth, it gained its experience of the Internal, yet each such experience tends to obliterate the traces of its own occasion.* (my emphasis)" (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 73-74). Thus I would argue that Hügel foreshadowed the debate started by Steven Katz in 1978 between contextualist understanding of mystical experiences versus essentialist interpretations of James and other scholars' views (particularly Robert Forman's) on mystical experience.

⁹² The book mixes elements from philosophy of religion, detailed historical biography, and theological-philosophical accounts on mysticism, which makes it hard to categorize the work as belonging to only one discipline.

⁹³ Von Hügel also identifies the three main "forces in Western civilization as Hellenism, Christianity, and science, powers whose proper harmonious interaction is necessary for the health of society." (McGinn 1991, 294)

⁹⁴ Both quotes from (McGinn 1991, 294)

⁹⁵ "Die Drei Reinen Typen der Legitimen Herrschaft", translated by Sam Whimster as 'The three pure types of legitimate rule.' See (Weber 2004 (1922))

and 1920. So if there is a linkage, it is possible that von Hügel influenced Weber's thinking, although I am not aware of any linkage nor correspondence between the two.

As James Kelly has shown, Hügel conception of the three elements of religion was heavily influenced by William James' early essay "Reflex Action and Theism."⁹⁶ Based on his reading of James, von Hügel developed an understanding that all human knowledge and activity start out with sense-impressions, followed by a central process of reflection, and ending in the discharge of will and action.⁹⁷ Hügel established a tripartite (some would say Trinitarian) schema not just for religion, but also for the growth of the individual personality, and the maturation of civilization. These schemata are interrelated, and in the following I will focus on the relation between the three elements of religion and the three stages of the development of the personality, as expounded by Hügel.

4.2.1 Institutionalism – The Authoritative-External-Historical-Traditional Element

As a child, one is born into a certain context. This context is simply given, i.e., it is normally taken for granted by the child that one's circumstances are the ordinary way of things, the way things are. So in terms of all growth in knowledge and religion, the first stage of development for an individual, and for the religious personality, is characterized by a relatively passive acceptance of sense data and the social interpretation of reality they represent. The certainty and authority of tradition, which comes from outside the person, force their way through and demand obedience and respect. For the normal development of the individual, he needs to simply accept the experiences brought about from these externals, he needs to trust these social and institutional structures. It is impossible not to be influenced by this stage and the context one has been brought up in, as "the External, Authoritative, Historical, Traditional, Institutional side and function of Religion are everywhere evident."⁹⁸

It is important to note that institutions, and the external, communal elements of religion in general, do not necessarily need to have ancient roots or follow centuries of unbroken

⁹⁶ (Kelly 1983, 201)

⁹⁷ "All the activities of specifically human life begin with a sense-impression, as the first, the one simply *given* element; that they move into and through a central process of mental abstraction and reflection, as the second element, contributed by the mind itself; and that they end, as the third element, in the discharge of will and of action, in an act of free affirmation, expansion and love." (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 57-58)

⁹⁸ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 51)

tradition. This element is comprised of both historic and old lineages, *but also* relatively new communal ecclesial elements of religious expressions. E.g., McGinn illustrates how Christian mysticism “especially in its formative phases, was always both ecclesial, that is, realized only in and through the community, and scriptural, that is, tied to the spiritual, hidden, or “mystical” meaning of the sacred texts.”⁹⁹

The positive sides of this element are that it provides safety, assurance and a foundation, upon which one can and must build one’s understanding of the social order. Most often, tradition and institutions are the gatekeepers to the already discovered wisdom of our forefathers, so it is also a necessary prerequisite for the next stage of development, which is the intellectual. On the negative side, however, there exists a real danger that an overemphasis on this institutional element can lead to disastrous effects, at the expense of the two others elements. From the history of Christendom, Hügel cites the Spanish Inquisition as the strongest warning of what can happen if there is “too great a preponderance of the “Objective,” of Law and thing, as against Conviction and Person; of Priest as against Prophet,”¹⁰⁰ – in short, he warns against the dangers of worshipping the *form* rather than the *meaning* of religious expressions. From Judaic history, Hügel mentions the Pharisees and the Jerusalem Sanhedrin as the fullest representatives of institutional extremity. There exists, in other words, a very real potential for this necessary component of religion to degenerate into a kind of superstition – “an oppressive materialization and dangerous would-be absolute fixation of even quite secondary and temporary expressions and analyses of religion,”¹⁰¹ and therefore it is paramount for Hügel to emphasize that all the three elements of religion need to be harmonized and balanced.

4.2.2 Intellectualism – The Analytic-Critical-Rational-Speculative Element

The second element of religion is associated with the development of one’s individuality. In our youth, with the growing consciousness of one’s autonomy, one gradually starts questioning the traditional truths one has up until then taken for granted. This questioning often leads to a direct challenging of the established order, with the possible rejection of some

⁹⁹ (McGinn 1991, 86)

¹⁰⁰ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. II.), 388)

¹⁰¹ The quote continues: “a ruinous belief in the direct transferableness of religious conviction; and a predominance of political, legal, physically coercive concepts and practices with regard to those most interior, strong yet delicate, readily thwarted or weakened, springs of all moral and religious character – spiritual sincerity and spontaneity and the liberty of the children of God.” (Hügel 1909 (Vol. II.), 387-388)

of one's previously held beliefs. Personal experience and one's own rationalization start to play an increasingly greater role in what one accepts or rejects, and for the religiously inclined, philosophy, theology and history can take on a new importance. The longing for creating a comprehensible understanding of everything, a system of the world, is a central driving force at this stage. This synthetic-philosophical element of religion is the soul-force by which we "analyze and synthesize, and the law of our being which requires us to weigh, compare, combine, transfer, or ignore the details and the evidential worth of what has been brought home to us through the stimulation of our senses." Through the rational element of religion our social, historical, and institutional environment together with our intellect "orders us to harmonize all these findings into as much as may be of an intelligible whole of religion, and to integrate this religious whole within some kind of (...) general conception as to our entire life's experience."¹⁰²

This element of religion is obviously necessary and important for both the future systematization and institutionalization of any religion, but also – perhaps most importantly – for the feelings of autonomy and responsibility for the individual. Without an intellectual component (the absence of which, in reality, would be impossible) which is strong and comprehensive, the individual could never reach independence from the traditional and historical elements, which could easily lead to abuses and lack of any real sense of spiritual freedom.

On the negative side, Hügel maintains that a destructive one-sidedness can develop from this element if left unchecked by the other two elements. This can lead to what he calls "Rationalistic Fanaticism,"¹⁰³ that very easily leads to indifference and agnosticism. To counter such a development, one also needs to take into account the third element, namely the mystical-operative element.

4.2.3 Mysticism – The Experimental-Emotional-Intuitive-Operative-Element

Hügel's third element of religion is called the experimental and mystical, and represents the highest maturity in man's spiritual evolution. At this stage "religion is rather felt than seen or reasoned about, is loved and lived rather than analyzed, is action and power, rather than either

¹⁰² Both quotes, (Hügel 1909 (Vol. II.), 389)

¹⁰³ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. II.), 389)

external fact or intellectual verification.”¹⁰⁴ Invoking his influence from James’ “Reflex Action and Theism,” Hügel concludes that man is foremost and necessarily a creature of action, more so than of sensation and of reflection. The ethical and volitional powers of the individual are accentuated, through not merely intellectualization and thinking, but by active engagement with external life and his personal inner struggles. Gradually, says Hügel, the man of action comes closer to his real self¹⁰⁵, and gains more experience of his deeper personality.

It is important to note that this mystical element of religion is not considered the ultimate, best, superior element of the three abovementioned elements. Despite the title of the book, and despite being classified as the most mature stage of the three modalities, von Hügel is very clear throughout the book that no one element is superior or exclusively better than the others. Rather, they are all interrelated and comprise a “multiplicity within unity”¹⁰⁶ – creating an organic dynamic which in its countless manifestations and variations come to the fore as different religious expressions throughout history. As examples of this variety, Hügel mentions some of the great variety within several religions, focusing on Christianity¹⁰⁷, wherein he believes the three modalities can be most clearly detected.

In addition to this, each of the three elements also contains an inherent dualism, a doubleness that may seem contradictory. Between history and institutionalism, there is the collusion of past and present. Between criticism and construction, there is a dichotomy with analysis and acuteness of mind on the one hand, and synthesis and richness and balance of imagination on the other. And finally, between mysticism and the operative, there is the clash between otherworldliness and intuition (which can be considered passive), and the operative and volitional (considered active).¹⁰⁸ According to Hügel, the three elements, and their single members of each pair, appear in every possible variety both in combination with, and in opposition to, all the others. However, “ultimately, not any one pair or member can bear its fullest fruit, without the aid of all the others,”¹⁰⁹ yet they all try to dominate the soul of the individual at the expense of the others – which is why it is so easy to fall into the reductive traps of rigid fanaticism, arrogant materialism or indifferent agnosticism.

¹⁰⁴ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 53)

¹⁰⁵ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 53)

¹⁰⁶ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 66-70)

¹⁰⁷ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 60-65)

¹⁰⁸ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. II.), 393)

¹⁰⁹ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. II.), 393)

The positive aspects of the mystical-experimental element of religion are that it accentuates the individual's affective capabilities, promotes independence from the external, and stresses interiority and subjectivity. This can work as an antidote against an abstract, cold and purely rational religious constitution. The stress is on a "dim yet direct and (in its general effects) immensely potent, sense and feeling, an immediate experience of Objective Reality, of the Infinite and Abiding, of a Spirit not all unlike yet distinct from our own."¹¹⁰ Hügel believes, in other words, that objective (divine) reality is accessible to the human personality – not through reason, but through intuitive felt mystical experience. When rational analytical discourse and the safety of tradition no longer satisfies the individual, he can turn inwards and discover a whole new universe and hitherto unforeseen dimensions of his religion or world view, and of himself. This experimental-intuitive move towards the interior is an important part of the process that leads, according to Hügel, to the development of a healthier, deeper and fuller personality.

There is a danger, however, associated with the mystical-emotional element, just like the two other elements also have their pitfalls. Mystical experiences interpreted as having been a direct, immediate rendezvous with reality, can be so intense and leave behind a powerful impression of such awesomeness, that everything else pales into insignificance. Why bother with endless discussions and debates about the nature of reality, or the existence of god, if one has felt and experienced the answers to such questions? Why listen to traditionalists, why visit institutions covered with the dust of days gone by, when one has *lived* the very things they preach and *seen* what is represented in the artworks of the places of worship? Similar questions and conundrums can easily lead the individual with mystical propensities and experiences astray – turning him into an arrogant, self-important, introverted fanatic – walking into all "forms of illusions or degenerate into pure sentimentality or emotional fanaticism."¹¹¹ For these reasons, the mystical-experimental element also needs to be balanced by the other modalities, lest it overrides them by its sheer immensity and potential power.

¹¹⁰ (Hügel 1909 (Vol. II.), 390)

¹¹¹ (Kelly 1983, 207) Hügel expounds: "the emotional-experimental force will, in its turn, be tempted to sweep aside both the external, as so much oppressive ballast; and the intellectual, as so much hair-splitting or rationalism. And if it succeeds, a shifting subjectivity, and all incurable tyranny of mood and fancy, will result – fanaticism is in full sight." (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 55)

4.3 Practice, Transformation and Technification

Meditation, prayer, and different forms of yoga are different yet similar forms of contemplative-mystical practices. They usually have different objects of focus and somewhat different objectives, but the technicalities of the practices are often quite similar. Meditation can e.g. be defined as a self-administered attention-based technique for inner transformation.¹¹² Does not the same apply for other forms of spiritual practice, like prayer? After all, all contemplative and non-contemplative practices require some mode of attention, and they usually are meant to produce some inner transformative effect – which can range from inner stillness, peace and reduced stress (e.g. mindfulness practices); destruction of harmful tendencies and psychological mechanisms like anger and hatred (e.g. christfulness); or appreciation and gratitude for life (e.g. centering prayer). The differences lie primarily in the rationale behind the practice and the metaphysical expectations attributed to it (e.g. Christian forms of practice like centering prayer is meant to open the individual up to the presence and grace of god, while secular mindfulness practice is primarily (for many people) a means of stress-reduction – the actual technicalities remain quite similar). But what exactly constitutes a spiritual practice or technique?

Sloterdijk defines a practice as “any operation that provides or improves the actor’s qualification for the next performance of the same operation, whether it is declared or not.”¹¹³ Further, Eifring argues that meditation is not just a form of practice but a technique, which is characterized by the five following components:

- (1) It is a deliberately undertaken practice aiming to produce certain effects.
- (2) Its procedures are specified with some degree of clarity.
- (3) It is clearly set aside from other activities in time.
- (4) It is sustained – repetitive or continuous – rather than sequential.
- (5) It involves aspects of the nervous system, and the effects are based on some psychobiological working mechanism.¹¹⁴

Most forms of meditation concur with most of these five points according to Eifring – the most typical meditation techniques display all of the characteristics, while less typical ones

¹¹² (Eifring 2013, 1) and (Eifring 2014, 1)

¹¹³ (Sloterdijk 2013, 4)

¹¹⁴ (Eifring 2014, 6-7)

might miss one or several characteristics.¹¹⁵ I think Eifring's five points work as a good point of departure for investigating and differentiating between different types of contemplative practices and techniques. E.g., the main cases examined in this dissertation – centering prayer, christfulness, and mindfulness – can be categorized as practices that are sustained, sequential, or both in the latter case, respectively. For the sake of clarity, I will use Sloterdijk's general definition of practice together with Eifring's abovementioned attention-based definition of meditation more generally as my definition of a *contemplative technique* or *contemplative practice*, and the words technique and practice will be used interchangeably. Also, in the course of the dissertation, when I write about contemplative *praxis*, I mean the combination of different contemplative techniques and practices that together comprise a specific contemplative praxis. Hence, I define a contemplative practice as any self-administered attention-based operation or procedure producing deep relaxation, and that provides or improves the actor's qualification for the next performance of the same operation, ultimately aiming for inner transformation.

The transformative component of contemplative techniques is paramount for understanding their significance and importance in religious traditions, and is the reason why “mystical” can be coupled to “contemplation.” Whatever mysticism really is, basically all researchers agree, as discussed in chapter 3, that mystical experiences are characterized by their transformative power. Still, even though over a century of research has been conducted about mysticism, little of it has focused on mystical-contemplative techniques. The emphasis of researchers has instead been on the mystical experience, and its interpretation, rather than on the means and procedures that supposedly produce such experiences. Luckily, this lack of serious research into the technical aspects of religion, mysticism and contemplation is beginning to change with the gradual but ongoing switch of paradigms from the linguistic turn into the intersubjective participatory anthropotechnic turn.

Inner transformation can mean a lot of different things. Most relevant to this dissertation is a general twofold sense of inner transformation as a process through which (i) there is a clear distinction between the time prior to the inner transformation, and the time afterwards¹¹⁶; and

¹¹⁵ Eifring mentions the famous “contemplation of different body parts-meditation” as an example of a practice that does not display all characteristics (it is missing point 4), as the focus – being sequential rather than sustained – is deliberately changed during the practice. (Eifring 2014, 7)

¹¹⁶ “Mystical states (...) are never merely interruptive. Some memory of their content always remains, and a profound sense of their importance. They modify the inner life of the subject between the times of their recurrence.” (James 2008 [1902], 268)

(ii) the transformation is, on some greater or minor level, noticeable for the individual who experiences it. A clear distinction between before/after and noticeability thus become the marks of inner transformation. It is a fair assumption that the transformative effects of contemplative-mystical techniques could explain why, historically and presently, ascetics, ecstasies and other types of spiritual specialists would voluntarily choose to practice these techniques despite the difficulties often associated with them¹¹⁷ (for more on the difficult aspects, see Part II and chapter 8). To be sure, the different techniques are often portrayed as enabling the individual to reach hitherto unknown inner states and experiences – such as states of bliss, boundless love, total freedom, deeper understanding of others and oneself, supernatural powers¹¹⁸, direct access to reality and the divine, etc. However, as you might have noticed already after reading my definition of inner transformation, it does not specify whether the transformation is generally good or bad. This is important to emphasize, as all three of the cases I will explicate and investigate in depth in Part II stress that practicing and working with contemplative techniques is not a linear one-directional rosy path towards guaranteed personal and spiritual improvement, but is rather a series of multi-directional spiraling movements – with fluctuating oscillations and variations in magnitude both upwards and downwards, between the pleasant and the unpleasant, the euphoric and the atrocious. If contemplative techniques indeed can work as mirrors for the deepest recesses of our psyches (as some of their proponents claim¹¹⁹), then such “bringing-forth” needs to be communicated candidly.

There are numerous examples in the different contemplative traditions of what transformation actually entails. Some we have already mentioned, but it is worthwhile to mention the ones relevant to the case studies of part II. As will be shown in the chapters on centering prayer and christfulness, both these forms of praxis aim toward purifying the soul and developing openness to the divine. Mindfulness praxis, on the other hand, define inner transformation more in terms of a sense of wellbeing, of being able to better self-regulate and control oneself and one’s reactions to the stresses of daily living. As will be seen in part II, a higher tolerance

¹¹⁷ One counter-argument to this assumption is the fact that most groups or individuals teaching specific contemplative techniques disseminated today on the global market are very much aware of how to advertise, and has successfully downplayed the possible adverse effects of practicing contemplative practices – this despite warnings against common pitfalls and dangers in the classical literature of spiritual training manuals like e.g. the *Philokalia* of the Hesychasts (Christianity), Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (Buddhism), or the *Yogasutra* of Patanjali (Hinduism).

¹¹⁸ (Samuel 2008, 162, 174)

¹¹⁹ E.g. (Madsen 2012, 19)

and readiness for change and the unexpected is another common element of inner transformation that is mentioned by practitioners of centering prayer, mindfulness and christfulness alike. Finally, the self-renunciation and self-imposed suffering of ascetics and some mystics (e.g. monks, nuns, basically all religious specialists who dedicate their lives to spiritual training) who not only practice contemplative techniques but also follow the corresponding communal (institutional) and ethical (intellectual) guidelines for self-disciplining (like the noble eightfold path in Buddhism, or comprehensive monastic vows in Christianity, etc.), most assuredly has a role to play in creating or influencing an individual's inner transformation. In other words, contemplative-mystical techniques themselves are not necessarily the only variable effecting inner transformation, although the main rationale behind the practices is the effecting of (or opening up for) such results. Von Hügel's insight into the multiplicity of the religious personality, and the interrelated status of the three elements of religion, are illuminating and helpful in this regard, lest we fall into oversimplifications and untenable reductionisms. Such overemphasizing of one particular aspect of contemplative training – in this case the technical – can lead to what I choose to call the *technification of religion*.

Technification of religion is a process wherein the mystical-experimental-intuitive element of religion predominates at the expense of the other two elements (Intellectualism and Institutionalism). Technification signifies therefore an overemphasis on the technical aspects of religious life, not always directly hostile towards the traditional or intellectual sides of religion, but necessarily threatening to these as the mystical disposition has a strong propensity for overshadowing the other two elements.¹²⁰ In the following, I will argue how I see technification as a process that is illustrative and extremely important for understanding the situation of religion today (especially in the West), but also I will try to show how technification is an integral part of Hügel's mystical-experimental element of religion, and how it has been very important throughout the history of religions. As evidence for the process of technification, both today and throughout history, I will specifically use Hügel's philosophy of religion and the subjectivization thesis of Heelas and Woodhead from their famous work *The Spiritual Revolution – why religion is giving way to spirituality* (2005). I will start by explicating the subjectivization thesis.

¹²⁰ "the emotional-experimental force will, in its turn, be tempted to sweep aside both the external, as so much oppressive ballast; and the intellectual, as so much hair-splitting or rationalism. And if it succeeds, a shifting subjectivity, and all incurable tyranny of mood and fancy, will result – fanaticism is in full sight." (Hügel 1909 (Vol. I.), 55)

The subjectivization thesis tries to account for one of the strangest contemporary predicaments of religion in Western societies, namely the concurrence of secularization *and* sacralization which is evident in the religious landscape. While there is a marked decline in church-attendance and other forms of traditional institutional worship and religious practice, there is also a noticeable growth and demand for alternative (often unchurched) forms of spirituality, many of which often sacralize subjectivity as their main source of significance. In short, the subjectivization thesis states that “‘the massive subjective turn of modern culture’ favours and reinforces those (subjective-life) forms of spirituality which resource unique subjectivities and treat them as a primary source of significance, and undermines those (life-as) forms of religion which do not,” and therefore, the thesis can work as an explanation of “the varied fortunes of different forms of religion and spirituality today by reference to a single process – the widespread cultural shift in emphasis from the value ascribed to life-as to the value ascribed to subjective-life.”¹²¹ This thesis is built on the Durkheimian principle that people “are more likely to be involved with forms of the sacred which are ‘consistent with their ongoing values and beliefs’ (...) - than with those who are not.”¹²² According to Heelas and Woodhead, the evidence for a subjective turn of Western contemporary culture is substantially documented.¹²³ What is important to keep in mind is that through a strong focus on subjectivity – and consequently, the experiential self – the subjectivization thesis can clearly be linked to von Hügel’s third element of religion, the emotional-experimental-mystical-intuitive element of religion. So in summary, the accentuation of subjectivity and the individual (in contrast to the traditional and communal) is one of the major conditions for technification.

As discussed above, Hügel places the experimentally “lived and felt” aspects of religion together with the mystical and volitional element of religion. According to Hügel, if one successfully incorporates this third element harmoniously with the other elements, then the truth of religion becomes a life subjectively appropriated and lived. The personal and participatory aspects of Hügel’s third element of religion cannot, therefore, be ignored. The keywords here are participatory, operative and subjectivity. Hügel recognizes the participatory nature of religion by including experimental, volitional and operative together with the mystical element. Significantly, he not only attests to the quiet, passive and

¹²¹ Both quotes from (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 78)

¹²² (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 78)

¹²³ (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 79)

introvertive sides of the mystical element, but also recognizes, and emphasizes, the active and powerful modalities associated with it.¹²⁴ Therefore, Hügel's conception of the mystical element of religion can be interpreted as a type of *techné* – a necessary tool to bring forth or reveal what cannot bring itself about; a form of knowledge which goes beyond the merely intellectual and theoretical by including the practical and the active through participation; an *experimental* approach to gain and deepen knowledge through *experience* by way of intuitive-emotional development, in need of continuous operating and testing out of contemplative techniques. This type of inner experimentation is typical and crucial for the technification process.

What then of concrete examples of technification? Contemporary examples from Buddhist, Christian and secular groups will be thoroughly investigated in part II of this dissertation. For now, I will only mention two examples. First we have a contemporary example – the modern revitalization of monasticism. According to McGinn “we are witnessing the emergence of a true world monasticism.”¹²⁵ In some respects, the revival of monasticism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is as remarkable as the story of its origin in the fourth. Today, we witness the noteworthy spread of (particularly Benedictine) monasticism, its variety of reform and renewal movements, and its growth not only in Western Europe (its traditional abode), but also the spread of new reforms into North America (since the mid-nineteenth century) and later into developing countries, “predominantly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia”¹²⁶ (since the mid-twentieth century). Although this modern trend certainly can be seen as a strengthening of the institutional element of religion, it can also be seen as strengthening the mystical element of religion¹²⁷, and hence, as an example of technification. Second, as to older forms of technification, the shramana-traditions of ancient India serve as an illustrative

¹²⁴ Contrary to many (often Jamesian) scholars who tend to exclusively focus on the passive, ascetic and world-denying aspects of mysticism. More lately, however, scholars have increasingly noticed and showed renewed interest in the relationship between contemplative-mystical practice and activism. Strikingly, these seemingly contradictory forms of activity seem to have a mutual influence on each other in some cases. McGinn illustrates some fascinating peculiarities about this by looking at the lives of three exemplary figures in the history of Western Christian monasticism – Antony the Hermit, Hildegard von Bingen, and Thomas Merton – in (McGinn 2006a)

¹²⁵ (McGinn 2006a, 164)

¹²⁶ (Ibid, p. 164)

¹²⁷ This because the interconnectedness between Christian monasticism and mysticism (and to some extent prophecy, at least according to Thomas Merton, who McGinn names as the pioneering model for world monasticism) cannot be denied. Indeed, the “dynamic character of monasticism as a paradoxical interaction of withdrawal and commitment” (McGinn 2006a, 167) attests to the operative elements of monasticism, and the thin line it represents between mysticism and institutionalism. See also McGinn's contribution about the linkage between mysticism and monastic asceticism in (Wimbush and Valantasis 1995, pp. 58-74)

example. From around 800 to 400 BC, Prakrit and Sanskrit texts illustrate the emergence of a new ideology of renunciation, in which “knowledge (*jnana*) is given precedence over action (*karma*), and detachment from the material and social world is cultivated through ascetic practices (*tapas*), celibacy, poverty, and methods of mental training (*yoga*).”¹²⁸ This period was characterized by increased urbanization, and consequently, more room for individualism and personal autonomy.¹²⁹ The time also saw a devastating spread of disease among the new urban population, which is hypothesized as a major contributing factor for the rise of ascetic movements and their increased emphasis, both philosophically and practically, on the problem of suffering. Thus, both the good and bad consequences of urbanization led to a loosening up of social norms and traditional authority, best evidenced by the rejection of many shramana-traditions of the authority of the Vedas (e.g. Buddha’s rejection of the caste-system). In this way, “personal experience (..) is placed above the received knowledge of the vedic revelation.”¹³⁰ It is in the context of the shramana-traditions that the formation of the Upanishads and the rise of Buddhism and Jainism occur. As such, we can primarily see in this period serious challenges posed against both institutionalism and tradition – through the thorough-going rejection or reinterpretation of orthodox brahmanical teachings¹³¹. A flowering of new intellectual developments and practical participatory approaches for gaining knowledge and liberation from suffering emerge from the shramana-traditions, and there is fair interplay between intellectualism and mysticism in the different schools. My argument is that the strong emphasis – both within Buddhism and Jainism, and in other shramana-schools like the Ajivikas¹³² – on contemplative techniques reveal that the experimental-mystical-operative element in many cases predominated at the expense of the analytical-speculative element, even though the intellectual element certainly also finds expressions in the

¹²⁸ (Flood 1996, 81)

¹²⁹ Primarily because of the growing need for entrepreneurial innovation and increased trade.

¹³⁰ (Flood 1996, 82)

¹³¹ It is important to note, however, that while Brahmanism rejected the authority and teachings of shramana-orders, teachings similar to those of shramana – concerning rebirth, retributive action, and liberation – were to find expressions in the Upanishads, the fourth and final layer of the Veda – the Vedanta (end of Veda). (Flood 1996, 82)

¹³² We only know of the Ajivikas from Buddhist and Jaina sources (who are hostile and hence not neutral), as their own texts did not survive and the tradition seemed to disappear by the end of the 13th-century. Possibly “the term Ajivikas may have been used as a general term, especially for naked ascetics.” (Samuel 2008, 120) Even though nothing specific has come down to us regarding their spiritual techniques, Eliade argues that “we must suppose that the sect had its own ascetic tradition and its own secrets for meditation, and that it was this esoteric tradition that accounted for its survival,” as it exerted its presence in India for two millennia. (Eliade 1969, 191) See also (Basham 1981)

abovementioned schools¹³³. After all, the analytical-speculative development tends to be slower and more gradual than the experimental-intuitive-mystical element, the latter of which sometimes manifests itself through the spiritual breakthroughs or particular philosophico-psychological insights of specific individuals, who then tend to become authority figures, like religious leaders or founders¹³⁴. In terms of speed, lasting effect and development, I think it is fair to say that of the three elements, the mystical tends to be the most rapid both in terms of its occurrence and its disappearance, followed by a more thorough intellectual analysis of the foundational experimental-mystical elements, whose elaborate doctrines in turn, lastly, fossilizes into an institutional framework. The last stage of institutionalization thus tends to happen a long time after the mystical breakthrough. Importantly, my argument stipulates that technification is a central part of the history of religions, as a process of reaction against most often institutionalism and to some extent intellectualism – always leading to a renewal of religious expressions and forms, often in the shape of what eventually becomes a new denomination or school of thought and practice within the tradition, or ultimately even an entirely new religion.¹³⁵

Technification is therefore, based on the abovementioned, defined as: a process in which the experimental-mystical element of religion (which is always participatory) predominates at the expense of the intellectual and institutional elements, often as a reaction against the predominance of the latter two – which leads to a rejection or reinterpretation of traditional teachings, and often the production of new teachings appropriated to the prevailing philosophical climate¹³⁶ of the participant. Technification, then, is a central and natural process of religious/contemplative development, evidenced both in ancient times and today's contemporary spiritual landscape. It is an appropriate term as it reminds us of *techne* and therefore denotes that the process is participatory, revelatory (*poietic*), and emphasizes using a

¹³³ A possible critique of my statement here – and indeed of von Hügel's trichotomy – is that it is very hard, maybe impossible, to know whether our earliest sources reflect mainly intellectual or mystical elements of the particular tradition described. The safest answer is to maintain that they represent both. Still, in the case of the historical core of Buddhist teachings, I agree with Samuel's argument that they were more likely to have "been a set of practical and experiential techniques rather than a body of discursive knowledge." (Samuel 2008, 139)

¹³⁴ E.g. the Buddha Sakyamuni for the Buddhists, Mahavira (also known as Vardhamana) for the Jains, and Makkhali Gosala for the Ajivikas. (Samuel 2008, 120)

¹³⁵ E.g. the possibility that at least parts of vedic religious practices gave rise to and morphed, through the shramana-critique, into Buddhism, Jainism and the expressions of what we today call classical Hinduism (Hinduism is a deceptively vague and quite recent term, whose origin and usage should be acknowledged and delimited in any detailed analysis. See (Flood 1996, 6-8).

¹³⁶ In this sense, technification does entail some degree of the intellectual element as well. But as explicated in chapter 2, all three elements of religion are, in the final analysis, intertwined and not readily separated.

tool (e.g. contemplative technique) or mastering a craft through training (asceticism) and experimenting with inner transformation (technical mysticism), to gain knowledge and new experiences that the individual believes to be missing in the two other elements of religion.

4.4 Asceticism as Technical Mysticism

As explained above, *techné* is related to the knowing-how, to working or crafting out something through participatory and experimental means. Asceticism, as discussed in chapter 3, can in all its variants be viewed as forms of training and self-forming, shaping oneself through the fires of pain, repetition and exercise. The types of training that applies to contemplative practices, that are identified by their transformative element and focus on self-administered attention-regulation, can be considered mystical insofar as they induce or “bring forth” entirely new experiences of a hitherto incomparable nature. In short, contemplative techniques seem to be able to induce transformative experiences. As instruction manuals or maps for the soul, contemplative practices elaborate and point towards the ineffable by saying “if you do A, B will happen”. Why not treat these claims as scientific hypotheses and test them¹³⁷ through the rigors of proper scientific scrutiny? This obviously does not apply to all contemplative practices, but the three practices investigated in this study can be classified under this rubric.

Therefore, I propose a (somewhat) radical empiricist notion: if mysticism research is to advance beyond the seemingly neutral third-person textual study of mystical texts – as nearly all academic study of mysticism has been a study of language¹³⁸ –, we need to start proper experimentation with mystical techniques and contemplative practices (which can be the same). Experiments (both personal and scientific) with practices of inner transformation are what I define as technical mysticism. Asceticism, understood as self-forming (Foucault), or as

¹³⁷ Ahead of his time, Kvastad provided valuable methodological reflections on how a scientific study of mysticism could be espoused (although his thoughts on the usefulness of EEG are outdated, but given the state of neuroscience at the time, this is certainly no crime). See (Kvastad 1980, 41-77). More recent methodological reflections of great value, e.g. on how to combine first and third-person perspectives, and possible solutions to the “hard problem” of studying consciousness, include (Rudrauf et al. 2003) and (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991).

¹³⁸ Of course, you could argue that all research is essentially a study of language. But the point here is that the semantics of someone who has tried out a contemplative-mystical practice compared to one who has not, is of crucial importance. Language, after all, is based on shared experiences. Communication is impossible if there is no shared modicum of experience.

“asymmetrical self-doubling” and a “supercompensation augmented by a form of superadaptation” through repeated self-discipline and self-denial (Sloterdijk)¹³⁹, is essentially then the same as technical mysticism.

With the exception of TM (Transcendental Meditation) and mindfulness research, scientific studies of contemplative practices have been conducted only sporadically in the past¹⁴⁰. Some of the main issues with TM and mindfulness research however, and indeed any scientific research of contemplative practice, include the problems related to non-randomized control group variables (i.e. weak research designs)¹⁴¹ and the difficulty of applying one standard definition of the object of study (i.e. one standard definition of meditation)¹⁴². Additionally, the supposed scientific proofs of the positive effects of practicing these types of contemplative practices have been substantially overhyped¹⁴³ in the media. Luckily, meditation researchers are increasingly trying to counter this by more balanced studies, evidenced best, I would argue, in the growing field of Contemplative Studies¹⁴⁴ in North-America.

Embracing the intersubjective participatory anthropotechnic turn, I also suggest, based on my own experience with contemplative practice, that agnostic or other researchers unfamiliar but interested in these subjects, should look into the emic (observant-near) perspectives of practitioners by practicing themselves – i.e. performing technical mysticism. In my own case,

¹³⁹ (Sloterdijk 2013, 233 & 321)

¹⁴⁰ Two interesting early examples include Deikman’s psychiatric evaluations of meditative and contemplative practices. See (Deikman 1963) and (Deikman 1966)

¹⁴¹ TM research has been accused of biased and poor research design, especially since many of the studies do not use control groups at all. Of 107 articles reporting on the effects of TM on cognitive function only 10 met the inclusion criteria of Canter et al. “Most were excluded because they used no controls or did not randomise subjects between interventions. Of the 10 trials included, 4 reported large positive effects of TM on cognitive function, four were completely negative, and 2 were largely negative in outcome. All 4 positive trials recruited subjects from among people favourably predisposed towards TM, and used passive control procedures. The other 6 trials recruited subjects with no specific interest in TM, and 5 of them used structured control procedures. The association observed between positive outcome, subject selection procedure and control procedure suggests that the large positive effects reported in 4 trials result from an expectation effect.” See (Canter and Ernst 2003)

¹⁴² (Nash and Newberg 2013) and (Newberg 2014)

¹⁴³ (Heuman 2014)

¹⁴⁴ One example is the ongoing “Varieties of Contemplative Experiences”-project at Brown University, which is currently collecting data on the underreported potentially adverse effects of contemplative practice.

such practicing led to new insights into possible reasons¹⁴⁵ for the popularity (both historically and contemporary) of contemplative practices. This might sound controversial, but as long as there is no risk of danger for oneself or others, I do not see why this should be such a taboo for the researcher. One natural objection would be that this is a case of doing religion as opposed to studying it academically, but in line with the participatory turn I would argue that such “doing” need not be detrimental for academic validity or reliability. Rather, it could enhance our understanding of a topic ignored far too long by researchers: namely the mysteries of our own potential for self-forming and inner transformation, our very capacity for technical mysticism.

4.5 Conclusion: Religions’ Inherent Technical Aspects

In this chapter, I have investigated the various meanings of the term *techne*, and its relation to *episteme* and *phronesis*. As has been shown, *techne* refers to both craft and a form of art, but the nature of such art form can vary greatly – from the mundane and specific know-how of building tables – the craftsmanship of table-building –, to the complex understanding of the governing principles of the universe, human nature, and self-control – the art of life. *Techne* is related to theory and knowledge insofar as it consists of knowing how-to, can give an account of its workings, and can be taught to others. It is at the same time practical, pertained to worldly participation, experimentation, action and doing, not just passive reflecting.

I have also looked into the difference and connections between contemplative practice, inner transformation, and technification. I argue that technification is an inherent aspect of religion, as a process of reaction against the overemphasis or predominance of non-technical aspects of religion. I have also argued for the need for experimentation with contemplative practice – what I call technical mysticism. Such a category could in my opinion be useful in the study of mysticism. An adequate understanding of religion cannot be complete without a thorough investigation into the technical aspects of religion. As religion is something participatory, something that engages the human mind, motivates so much action, and promises such grand

¹⁴⁵ Briefly, I would argue that noticeable increase in metacognitive awareness, self-control (mental, emotional and bodily), and the taste of uncommon, “abnormal” experiences (out-of-body experiences, intense emotions, collapse of sense of spacio-temporality, etc.) after practicing contemplative practices easily institutes the practitioner toward more practice. Experiencing these effects of practice is obviously different to reading about them.

rewards for following and mastering their decrees and attaining their secrets – it is impossible to understand and explain religious behavior and development, in all its variations, without accounting for the technical aspects of religion. Therefore, we will now turn to part II of the dissertation, in which I will examine contemplative forms of *techné*.

PART II – CASE STUDIES

5 Case Study A: From Buddhist Vipassana to Secular Mindfulness

[Mindfulness is] the unfailing master key for *knowing* the mind, and is thus the starting point; the perfect tool for *shaping* the mind, and is thus the focal point; the lofty manifestation of the achieved *freedom* of the mind, and is thus the culminating point. Therefore the 'Foundations of Mindfulness' (*Satipatthana*) have rightly been declared by the Buddha as the 'Only Way' (*ekayano maggo*).

- Nyanaponika Thera (1962)¹⁴⁶

Mindfulness is the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (...).

Mindfulness can only be understood from the inside out. (...)

The intention and approach behind MBSR were never meant to exploit, fragment, or decontextualize the dharma, but rather to *recontextualize* it within the frameworks of science, medicine (including psychiatry and psychology), and healthcare (...).

- John Kabat-Zinn (2013)¹⁴⁷

In this chapter, I will trace and offer an explanation of the historic development and rise of what can be called the Mindfulness Movement. This movement fosters and operates on the assumption that a specific series of so-called secular meditation techniques of mental self-administration can solve many of life's most common problems, and work as self-therapy. Over the course of the last decade, there was a dramatic increase in its popularity and propagation. Football coaches, Pentagon officials, corporate CEOs as well as professional clinicians, teachers and politicians have attested to its efficacy. Seemingly, these techniques work wonders. Its impact can be felt far beyond the pillars of academia and the public meditation centers. But what exactly is mindfulness? Both as a term and as technique, wherefrom does it originate? Why such popularity?

To answer these questions it is necessary to look closer at the origins of the term, its Buddhist roots, and its practical application today. There are numerous studies that have been

¹⁴⁶ (Nyanaponika 1962, 24)

¹⁴⁷ (Kabat-Zinn 2013, pp. 281-300)

conducted to this effect. These and the works of John Kabat-Zinn, the main popularizer of the term, will be the primary sources for my explication of the Mindfulness Movement. Of the several works by Jon Kabat-Zinn on mindfulness, I will use his main work which propelled him onto the US and then international stage as a guru of stress management systems. The book *Full Catastrophe Living – How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation* (1990) has been called “the bible for a mind/body movement that has transformed Western medicine.”¹⁴⁸ It is based on Kabat-Zinn’s popular 8-week stress reduction programme at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre, where mindfulness is taught to help people cope with illnesses, stress, anxiety and pain. In the following, I will argue that within the realm of contemporary Buddhism, mindfulness represents one of the best examples of technification of religion. I shall argue that mindfulness, as presented by its main proponents, is highly technical not just in terms of practicability, but also as a way or craft of life meant to effect or open the doors of self-transformation. Finally, I shall examine what may be the underlying causes behind its increasingly noticeable popularity.

5.1 From *Sati* to *Vipassana* to MBSR (Mindfulness-based stress reduction)

The founder of the Pali Text Society, T.W. Rhys Davids, was probably the one who first translated the Buddhist technical term *sati* (in its Pali form) or *smṛti* (in its Sanskrit form) by the word ‘mindfulness’, in 1881¹⁴⁹. Following Rhys Davids example, especially his translation of the *Mahasattipatthana Sutta*, ‘mindfulness’ was established as the standard English translation for *sati* in subsequent Buddhist scholarship (e.g. in Chalmer’s partial translation of the *Majjhima Nikaya* (1926), Nyanaponika’s far-reaching and important work *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (first published in 1954), and Bhikku Nanamoli’s influential translation of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* (first published in 1956), to name but a few)¹⁵⁰.

The basic meaning of the *sati/smṛti* (henceforth only *sati* will be used) is “memory” or “recollection”. According to Jens Braarvik, in the traditional Indian context wherein the term originated, *sati* denoted what every Indian of the upper class had to remember, namely *sruti*,

¹⁴⁸ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, Back cover)

¹⁴⁹ (Gethin 2013, 263)

¹⁵⁰ (Gethin 2013, 265-266)

which means the tradition of interpretation of “that which has been heard from the gods.”¹⁵¹ In its Buddhist usage however, ‘mindfulness’ works better as an illustrative translation, because it not only denotes active remembrance, but is also connected to the present moment. In fact, *sati* could (in Buddhist usage) be understood as the “remembering of the present”, which in Buddhist psychology is a projection of the past. Therefore, Nyanaponika and others argue that ‘mindfulness’ makes more sense than ‘memory’ as the correct English translation, as it shows “the close and constant connection between the functions of memory and attention (or mindfulness), and will thereby explain why in Pali, the language of the Buddhist scriptures, both these mental functions are expressed by the one word *sati*.”¹⁵² The scriptural basis for *sati* is found in the famous *Satipatthana Sutta*, which is translated by Nyanaponika as ‘Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness’. This discourse appears on two occasions in the Pali Canon – “(1) as the 10th Discourse of the ‘Middle Collection of Discourses’: (*Majjhima Nikaya*), (2) as the 22nd Discourse of the ‘Long Collection’ (*Digha Nikaya*) where it has the title *Maha-satipatthana Sutta*, i.e. the *Great Discourse*, etc.”¹⁵³ These texts indicate the importance of *sati* as being “sufficient as the *ekayano maggah* – the one vehicle or way to enlightenment.”¹⁵⁴ What one can use as objects for mindfulness, what to be aware of, is listed in the *Satipatthana Sutta*¹⁵⁵, classified under categories such as body, feelings, mind and states of consciousness. Under feelings-mindfulness one e.g. finds an emphasis on the coming and going of emotions; under body-mindfulness one can find the famous “walking meditation,” both of which are taught in Kabat-Zinn’s adoption of these classical and canonical practice descriptions into his own system of contemplative training.

Two other terms popular in contemporary meditation lingo are *samatha* and *vipassana* (Pali). These technical terms can be translated as “inner peace, quiescence, peacefulness or peaceful/calm meditation,” and “seeing all around, expanded vision, or insight meditation,”¹⁵⁶ respectively. These two words seem to denote qualities of meditation as opposed to specific forms of meditation, and are poorly defined in the Buddhist literature. Within Buddhist Studies and especially among Buddhist practitioners, there is contention about whether the meditative emphasis should be on *samatha*, *vipassana*, or a combination of the two¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵¹ (Braarvig 2014, pp. 48 and 56)

¹⁵² (Nyanaponika 1962, 25) See also (Braarvig 2014, 48)

¹⁵³ (Nyanaponika 1962, 9)

¹⁵⁴ (Braarvig 2014, 48)

¹⁵⁵ (Nyanaponika 1962, 57-75)

¹⁵⁶ (Braarvig 2014, 56)

¹⁵⁷ See (Sharf 1995, pp. 259-265) and (Houtman 2014, 97)

Traditionally, both approaches have been understood to be vital for meditative achievements, but modern readings tend to separate them¹⁵⁸. An example of the former is Martine Batchelor's understanding of *samatha* and *vipassana* as the two main ingredients of Buddhist meditation, translated by her as "concentration" and "experiential inquiry," respectively¹⁵⁹. According to Robert Sharf, the modern practice of *vipassana* can be traced to

early twentieth-century teachers such as Phra Acharn Mun (1870-1949) in Thailand, Dharmapala (1864-1933) in Sri Lanka, and U Narada (1868-1955) and Ledi Sayadaw (1846-1923) in Burma. Prior to this time, *bhavana* (meditation, or mental development) consisted largely of the recitation of Pali texts pertaining to meditation (such as the *Satipatthana-sutta* and the *Metta-sutta*), chanting verses enumerating the qualities of the Buddha, reciting formulaic lists of the thirty-two parts of the body, and so on. (...) Even today, after the full effect of the *vipassana* movement has been felt, historical and ethnographic studies still testify to the fact that meditation plays a minor if not negligible role in the lives of the majority of Theravada monks.¹⁶⁰

Controversially, Sharf claims that the specific techniques and lineages of *vipassana* practice cannot be traced further back than the 19th-century. He stresses that recreation of Theravada Buddhism and the influence of the Occident of this period, especially in Burma and Sri Lanka, can be seen "in the context of the major ideological changes precipitated by the forces of urbanization, modernization, and the spread of Western style education, all of which contributed to the rise of Protestant Buddhism."¹⁶¹ Further, he argues that the elites of Burma and Sri Lanka responded to their colonial situation by embracing their national and spiritual heritage through Theravada Buddhism, only "refashioned in the image of post-Enlightenment Christianity."¹⁶² This reform of Theravada can be summarized by four characteristics: (i) the values of individualism¹⁶³, (ii) a rational or "instrumental" approach to Buddhist teachings, often involving "the repudiation of the 'supernatural' or 'magical' aspects of Buddhism, the

¹⁵⁸ "(...) it would seem that the taking of the *Satipatthana Sutta* as a succinct manual of insight (*vipassana*) meditation as opposed to calm (*samatha*) meditation is a modern Buddhist reading rather than a traditional one. Neither the term *vipassana* nor *samatha* in fact occurs in the Sutta, while a number of other Suttas which elaborate the practice of *satipatthana* quite clearly integrate it with the practice of absorption (*jhana*) and concentration (*samadhi*), which comes to be seen as emblematic of *samatha* practice; (...) I am not here concerned with trying to establish an original and authentic interpretation of the *Satipatthana Sutta*, only with establishing that there is clear evidence in the Pali sources of a traditional reading of the *Satipatthana Sutta* as setting out both calm and insight practice, and little explicit indication before the twentieth century that it has been read exclusively in terms of the way of insight." See (Gethin 2013, 273)

¹⁵⁹ (Batchelor 2013, 157) Another example in which *samatha* and *vipassana* are understood to describe two aspects of the same meditative state can be found among several Tibetan Buddhist theorists. See (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 506)

¹⁶⁰ (Sharf 1995, 242)

¹⁶¹ (Sharf 1995, 251)

¹⁶² (Sharf 1995, 252) One of Sharf's main arguments in his article – that the tendency towards emphasizing religious experience is essentially a western influenced impetus – is nuanced and problematized, in relation to the Burmese context, by (Houtman 2014, pp. 110-115)

¹⁶³ "which included the affirmation of worldly achievement coupled with "this-worldly asceticism." (Sharf 1995, 252)

rejection of ‘empty’ ritual, and the insistence that Buddhism is a ‘philosophy’ rather than a ‘religion,’”¹⁶⁴ (iii) a new universalism, and rejection of the authority of the clergy, and (iv) a renewed interest in the scriptural legacy of Theravada Buddhism, the impetus for which mainly came from British Orientalists like T.W. Rhys Davids. The Theosophists also played a crucial part in the Theravada revival.¹⁶⁵

Today, most of the popular *vipassana* techniques taught internationally can be traced back to two *vipassana* lineages from Burma, namely those based on the methods of Ledi Sayadaw and U Narada¹⁶⁶. Arguably, the method of *vipassana* that has been most influential is called “The New Burmese method.” Believed to be initiated by U Narada’s understanding of the *Satipatthana-sutta*, a famous disciple of his, Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982), became the main disseminator of this practice. Many of Mahasi’s disciples spread the technique throughout South and Southeast Asia, Europe and America¹⁶⁷. When “Westerners speak of *vipassana* today they are often referring to the specific style popularized by Mahasi.”¹⁶⁸ A major reason for this tradition’s important influence is that it was the first to establish a *vipassana* practice center for the laity in Burma, during the first decade of the 20th century¹⁶⁹. Additionally, Sharf highlights two central features of Mahasi’s teachings contributing to their popularity: (1) the ability to enter into “the path of *vipassana* (insight into the Buddhist truths) without the need for prior training in concentration exercises (*samatha*) or mastery of advanced states of meditative trance (*jhana*),”¹⁷⁰ and (2) the promise of quick results – e.g. within a month or even within 7 days for the most apt, practitioners would be able to experience “*nibbana*-

¹⁶⁴ (Sharf 1995)

¹⁶⁵ In 1880 Colonel Henry Olcott inaugurated, together with Helena Blavatsky, the Buddhist Theosophical Society in Sri Lanka. Olcott’s “Sri Lankan protégé, Anagarika Dharmapala, founded the Maha Bodhi Society in 1891 in order to promote the Theravada revival in India as well as in Sri Lanka. Dharmapala was to become the Asian spokesman for Theravada in the West, representing his thoroughly Anglicized version of ‘original Buddhism’ to the Chicago World Parliament of Religions in 1883.” See (Sharf 1995, 253)

¹⁶⁶ “The two most influential techniques historically are the Ledi Hsayadaw ‘mindfulness of breathing’ (*anapana*) and Mingun Hsayadaw (U Narada) ‘mindfulness’ or ‘rising and lowering of the belly’ (*thadipahtan* or *hpaungpein*) techniques.” See (Houtman 2014, 96)

¹⁶⁷ Some of his more notable Western students include Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, who together founded the IMS (Insight Meditation Society) in 1975 in Barre, Massachusetts, which has become an important and influential institution for spreading the practice of *vipassana* (i.e. the Mahasi/Burmese method) and the abovementioned Sri Lankan and Burmese (and to some degree Thai) versions of Reform (or Protestant) Theravada Buddhism.

¹⁶⁸ (Sharf 1995, 255) For more specifics on the origin and practice of the “Burmese Satipatthana Method,” see (Nyanaponika 1962, pp. 85-102) However, according to Houtman, “the Ledi Sayadaw *anapana* method is internationally the more widely practiced among laity. (...) largely through the teachings of Goenka, who returned from Burma to India.” See (Houtman 2014, 97)

¹⁶⁹ (Houtman 2014, 96)

¹⁷⁰ (Sharf 1995, 255)

tasting.” Consequently, Mahasi differed significantly with the traditionalist view on the availability and time requirements needed for results from meditative practice.¹⁷¹ The result of these main features – i.e. accessible easy-to-learn meditation techniques and their propagation through the establishing of urban meditation centers open for the laity¹⁷² – led to a democratization of meditation practice. This started in Burma, then spread to other Asian countries and eventually also to the West, where it would influence, among others, Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Jon Kabat-Zinn is architect behind the mindfulness-based stress reduction programme (henceforth MBSR). His definition of mindfulness mentioned at the start of the chapter has become the *prima facie* standard expression in the West for what mindfulness is. Kabat-Zinn acknowledges several important influences in his development of MBSR, including Theravada (i.e. the modern *vipassana* reform movements discussed above) and Mahayana (Soto and Rinzai Zen traditions) roots, and some currents from yogic traditions and the teachings of Krishnamurti.¹⁷³ Kabat-Zinn started his daily meditation practice in 1966, and describes how he had a peculiar vision during a two-week IMS *vipassana* retreat in 1979. The vision had mystical qualities (even though Kabat-Zinn himself does not call it “mystical”), including James’ two predominant qualities (noetic quality and ineffability). Most importantly, however, it was transformative:

(..) I had a ‘vision’ that lasted maybe 10 seconds. I don’t really know what to call it, so I call it a vision. It was rich in detail and more like an instantaneous seeing of vivid, almost inevitable connections and their implications. (...) I saw in a flash not only a model that could be put in place, but also the long-term implications of what might happen if the basic idea was sound and could be implemented in one test environment – namely that it would spark new fields of scientific and clinical investigation, and would spread to hospitals and medical centers and clinics across the country and around the world, and provide right livelihood for thousands of practitioners. Because it was so weird, I hardly ever mentioned this experience to others. But after that retreat, I did have a better sense of what my karmic assignments might be. It was so compelling that I decided to take it on wholeheartedly as best I could.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ “The claim that *nibbana* can be reached in the course of a month or less is truly remarkable, given the widespread view among the traditionalists that it is impossible for anyone to become an *ariya-puggala* in modern times.” See (Sharf 1995, 256)

¹⁷² According to Sharf, there was virtually no opportunity for laypersons to study meditation prior to the modern era, seeing as meditation practice was rare even within the sangha. See (Sharf 1995, 257) Other researchers consider this spread of meditation among the laity to be the “greatest single change to have come over Buddhism in Sri Lanka (and indeed in other Theravada countries) since the Second World War.” See (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 237)

¹⁷³ Other influences are also mentioned, including the early works of Dan Goleman and Richard Davidson on the potential clinical applications with meditation, and Goldstein’s *The Experience of Insight* (1976). See (Kabat-Zinn 2013, pp. 289-290)

¹⁷⁴ (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 287)

This experience led him to initiate what was later¹⁷⁵ to become MBSR in 1979 at Harvard University Medical School. He notes how “pretty much everything I saw in that 10 seconds has come to pass (...).”¹⁷⁶

5.2 The Secularization of Modern (Theravada) Buddhism

Kabat-Zinn’s vision gave him the impetus to create a system of stress-relief based on his experience with Buddhist practice adapted to an American audience. To do this, he had to simplify and americanize the terms used, and contextualize the dharma within respectable fields of inquiry, which in this case would be medicine and psychology. Being a professor of medicine and a charismatic leader-type, he proved to be the right man for the job. Kabat-Zinn explicates his thinking on developing an American vocabulary to accomplish this endeavor:

I thought of it in those terms at the time. Now I am not quite sure what adjective to use. Secular might do, except that it feels dualistic, in the sense of separating itself from the sacred; *I see the work of MBSR as sacred as well as secular*, in the sense of both the Hippocratic Oath and the Bodhisattva Vow being sacred, and the doctor/patient relationship and the teacher/student relationship as well. Perhaps we need new ways of ‘linguaging’ our vision, our aspirations, and our common work. Certainly it is only a matter of ‘American’ in the US. Each country and culture will have its own challenges in shaping the language to its own heart-essence without denaturing the wholeness of the dharma¹⁷⁷ (my emphasis).

It is worth noting that Kabat-Zinn uses the terms *secular* and *sacred* when he describes the work and meaning of MBSR. The verbalized forms of these seemingly mutually exclusive concepts and the processes they represent – whether understood as growth or decline of traditional institutional authority, or as strengthening personal disinterest or interest of the importance of a spiritual/religious element in one’s life – have been shown to concur in Western societies, especially by Heelas and Woodhead.¹⁷⁸ They, however, studied such a concurrence by comparing and dichotomizing two categories, namely religion and spirituality, arguing that the former is characterized by life-as forms “(life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.),” while the latter is related to subjective-life, which entails “life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-

¹⁷⁵ “(..) at a certain point in the early 1990s, it seemed sensible to formally begin calling what we were doing mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) although, in point of fact, we had been referring to what we did as training in ‘mindfulness meditation’ from the very beginning in the scientific papers coming out of the Stress Reduction Clinic” See (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 289)

¹⁷⁶ (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 287)

¹⁷⁷ (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 301)

¹⁷⁸ (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, especially pp. 77-128)

relation.”¹⁷⁹ The short and simplified version of Heelas and Woodhead’s argument is that religion (and life-as variants in general) is losing ground in the West, a process fitting all of Dobbelaere’s three senses of secularization previously referred to in chapter 2; whereas spirituality (and non-spiritual subjective-life versions) is gaining ground. This is especially true where its proponents are actively adapting to the needs of the public, providing e.g. alternatives to deal with pain and stress through MBSR (which can thus be viewed in the third sense of Dobbelaere’s exposition of secularization – i.e. as change in the religious economy adapting to the new requirements of the times).

We have already seen how the fusion of some Western norms and expectations (through colonialism, with traditional Buddhist norms and practices contributed to what Sharf and others have called Reform Buddhism, which has an explicit focus on individuality, as well as a clear instrumental approach to Buddhist teachings. This instrumentality can be seen in Kabat-Zinn’s operational definition of mindfulness¹⁸⁰. On the one hand, instrumentality is reminiscent of what Weber criticized about the calculatedness and extreme bureaucratization of modernity – the notion that everything can be mastered through calculation, planning and intellectualization. This “disenchanted” Weberian notion of modern Western life can in the case of MBSR relate to the idea of how an 8-week course, or the mastery of technicalities of a certain practice, is seen as sufficient to reduce pain and stress, and thereby “cure” the maladies of psycho-somatic discomfort (e.g. stress or existential crisis) through a thoroughly calculated intellectual process. This is an example of disenchantment insofar as it strips the healing process of any magical or spiritual element by reducing the process to a mechanistic neuro-causal chain of events¹⁸¹ that can be perfectly controlled and calculated. On the other hand, though, Kabat-Zinn repeatedly stresses the non-instrumental dimension of mindfulness¹⁸², and how his “personal affinity with the various streams of Chan and Zen”¹⁸³ lead to an emphasis from the early start of MBSR on non-doing and non-instrumentality, and hence on non-striving, not-knowing, and significantly, “non-attachments to outcomes, even to

¹⁷⁹ (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 3)

¹⁸⁰ Mindfulness is defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” See (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 291)

¹⁸¹ And invoking fitting concepts of neuroscience, like mindfulness practice can lead to an “increase in prefrontal cortex activity, stronger amygdala regulation capabilities, enlarged cortical thickness, increased neuroplasticity, etc...” QQQQ

¹⁸² E.g. in (Kabat-Zinn 2004, pp. 33-34, 37-40, 89-91, 177-179, 349-352)

¹⁸³ (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 292)

positive health outcomes.”¹⁸⁴ According to Kabat-Zinn, healing is understood not as a cure, but rather as “a transformation of view, (...) recognizing your intrinsic wholeness and, simultaneously, your connectedness to everything else. Above all it involves coming to feel at peace within yourself.”¹⁸⁵ He further elucidates how it is a uniquely personal endeavor to achieve such healing¹⁸⁶. In this sense, MBSR can be seen as a substantial expression of the subjective anthropotechnic turn, accentuating the relation towards oneself as opposed to outer forms of authority, and, to quote Sloterdijk, validating one’s “immunological status in the face of vague risks of living and acute certainties of death.”¹⁸⁷

From a Buddhist perspective, MBSR can be seen as a secularized¹⁸⁸ form of Buddhism made accessible to the West through the skillful means (*upaya*) of Kabat-Zinn and his earliest colleagues at the Stress Reduction clinic. However, some have feared that Kabat-Zinn’s recontextualization of Buddhist teachings might close the door to the traditional dharma, by de-familiarizing practitioners with the vast richness of original concepts and teachings found in the Pali-canon, “the metaphors of the Mahayana sutras and the paradoxes of the Zen koans.”¹⁸⁹ Kabat-Zinn himself notes that it is more important for MBSR teachers to embody the essence of the dharma and guide students to experiment with the practices so that they can taste and see for themselves the reality of the Buddhist doctrines, like the Four Noble Truths (Kabat-Zinn proposes to call these ‘the four realities’)¹⁹⁰, the Eightfold Noble Path, the doctrine of non-self, etc. His point is that the essence, rather than cultural baggage and foreign words¹⁹¹, is the crux of meditative practice and efficiency. As we saw above, Kabat-Zinn used, although reluctantly, ‘secular’ as a description of MBSR vocabulary, but it is important to note that he himself does not separate MBSR’s Buddhist’s roots from the practice.¹⁹² However, the de-emphasis on explicit Buddhist discourse in the MBSR programs (like the insistent use of ‘stress’ instead of ‘dukkha’) seems to have led to the assumption that

¹⁸⁴ (Kabat-Zinn 2013)

¹⁸⁵ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 184)

¹⁸⁶ “The meditation practice, taken on in the spirit of self-exploration and self-enquiry, can transform our capacity to face, embrace, and work with and within the full catastrophe. But to make this transformation a reality in your life requires that you take responsibility for adapting the basic practice so that it becomes *yours*, so that you ‘own’ it, so that it fits with *your* life and *your* needs!” See (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 171)

¹⁸⁷ (Sloterdijk 2013, 233)

¹⁸⁸ Again, in Dobbelaere’s third sense, as a change in the religious economy.

¹⁸⁹ See (Maex 2013)

¹⁹⁰ (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 299)

¹⁹¹ “(..) we can dive right into the experience of *dukkha* in all its manifestations without ever mentioning *dukkha*; dive right into the ultimate sources of *dukkha* without ever mentioning the classical etiology.” (Kabat-Zinn 2013, 298)

¹⁹² As a case in point, the word ‘dharma’ is used 60 times in this article: (Kabat-Zinn 2013)

mindfulness is something completely secular (as in non-religious) and completely unrelated to Buddhism. Given the facts just mentioned, and the fact that to be a certified MBSR instructor you need to complete and attend a long-stay instructor-led meditation retreat¹⁹³ (the great majority of which tend to be predominately Buddhist), it is hard to separate MBSR completely from its Buddhist roots.

Still, it can be argued that MBSR not only represents a secularization of Modern Buddhism (which it undoubtedly does to some extent), but also it can be understood as a form of re-enchantment (*Wiederzauberung*). By re-enchantment I mean the reversal of Weber's disenchantment, the return of the magical or mystical, of those most sublime values observable in public life that he thought went away in the maelstrom of modernity.

5.3 The *techne* of Mindfulness

Mindfulness, as understood and taught by Kabat-Zinn, is essentially a purposeful, non-judgmental state of being in the present moment. This present-mindedness is incredibly near and immediately accessible; while at the same time it is not a common state of being for most people. Many will find it difficult to maintain such an aware and open outlook throughout the moments of daily life. If one can learn to do this however, Kabat-Zinn suggests that it can alter the way one perceives and deals with the world, oneself, and one's worries in life. Significantly, being in the moment can supposedly help with a wide range of issues (greater acceptance and hence reduction of pain, self-awareness leading to self-acceptance, improved relationships, etc.), and is indeed the only thing we can truly control. Through his highly acclaimed MBSR programme, Kabat-Zinn developed an eight week training system with various practices that cultivate mindfulness, with the intention of reducing stress. These practices include focus on the breath, sitting meditation, the body-scan technique, yoga practices, walking meditation, and loving-kindness meditation. Kabat-Zinn devotes a chapter for most of these practices, ending the chapters with practical instructions on the technicalities of the practices. First though, he emphasizes that certain fundamental attitudes should be cultivated at the start of mindfulness practice, including non-judging, patience, a beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance and letting go.¹⁹⁴ These seven attitudes, together with a

¹⁹³ Based on the UK Mindfulness Trainers' Network criteria. See URL: <http://mindfulnet.org/page30.htm>

¹⁹⁴ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 33-39)

sense of commitment, self-discipline and intentionality, are supposedly what will make the MBSR program most effective for its practitioners.¹⁹⁵

Focusing on the breath is an ancient practice, and possibly the most accessible object for meditation¹⁹⁶ as it is autonomous and ever-present in the living organism. Kabat-Zinn underlines how breathing is an important element in the healing process, and distinguishes between two ways of practicing breathing meditation. The first, deemed formal, is a disciplined approach, where you sit down and only focus on the breath. This can be done in numerous ways: focusing on the in- and outbreaths by the nostrils or focusing on the movements of the abdomen while breathing, and following the breath as if “you were riding the waves of your own breathing.”¹⁹⁷ The other way of practicing breath-meditation, deemed informal, is to be aware of your breathing sometimes throughout the day, tuning in to it at different times during the day while noticing the rise and contraction of your abdomen a few times. The first week of MBSR at the stress clinic generally starts out with a sitting meditation focusing on the feelings of the breath at the belly rather than at the nostrils, as this “tends to be particularly relaxing and calming in the early stages of practice.”¹⁹⁸ Because breathing is remarkably fundamental and effective as an anchor for awareness, it is used as a gateway into the other practices used for cultivating mindfulness.¹⁹⁹

Sitting meditation is introduced in the second class of the MBSR course. Now, the objects of attention starts with the breathing, and is turned into including the sensation of the body just sitting; listening and trying to feel sounds; observation of the process of thinking and the fluctuating feelings that come and go; and finally just sitting with “Choiceless Awareness,”²⁰⁰ which Kabat-Zinn defines as being completely open and receptive to whatever comes into the field of awareness, letting everything come and go, like passing clouds. In the “Choiceless Awareness,” one should not even focus on the breath, but just be completely open to whatever arises in the field of consciousness. In the other forms, the breath is used both as a gateway into the practice, and as an anchor to which the practitioner can return if concentration is dropping and the mind becomes too unstable. The body-scan technique is the third exercise that is practiced during the first two weeks of the MBSR course, and the first formal

¹⁹⁵ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 41-46)

¹⁹⁶ «Breathing is the universal foundation for meditation practice.» (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 57)

¹⁹⁷ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 58)

¹⁹⁸ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 52)

¹⁹⁹ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 71)

²⁰⁰ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 74)

mindfulness practice the participants engage in intensively, meaning 45 minutes per day, six days a week, for at least two weeks. It involves lying down and gently going through different parts of the body, using the breath and transporting it to different body parts, feeling the sensations of the body. The practice involves basically being a detached witness to “your breath and your body, region by region, as you scan from the feet to the top of your head.”²⁰¹ The practice can work as a purification process, but Kabat-Zinn reiterates the importance of non-striving and acceptance for it to be successful – i.e., if the aim of the practice is to purify the body, cleansing it of pain and tension, then that intention might get in the way of actually doing so.

In weeks 3 and 4 of the MBSR course, mindful yoga practices are introduced as the third formal practice of mindfulness (along with body scan and sitting meditation), and the participants start alternating the body scans with yoga. The yoga postures are based on hatha yoga²⁰², which consists of “gentle stretching and strengthening exercises, done very slowly, with moment-to-moment awareness of breathing and the sensations that arise as you put your body in various configurations known as ‘postures.’”²⁰³ For Kabat-Zinn yoga is primarily used as a practice of being in the body or to “rebody” ourselves, and the side-effects of prudent mindful yoga practice include full body conditioning, improving bodily strength, balance and muscle flexibility.

Walking meditation can be practiced both as a formal meditation – in which case one does it for an elaborate period of time, slowly and intentionally, with full focus on some or all aspects of walking (like the feet, the movement of the torso as the legs are moving, etc.). Or it can be practiced as an informal meditation, meaning that it can be practiced in daily life just briefly, for a few moments, whenever it feels right.

Loving-kindness meditation is taught in the MBSR course when the participants practice mindfulness for a full day. The full day entails using the full repertoire of practices taught over the course of 7 weeks to experiment with mindfulness, plus the new practice of loving-kindness. This practice can supposedly have powerful effects on many people. It is based on

²⁰¹ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 89)

²⁰² Hatha yoga is “the yoga of ‘force’ focusing on various postures, breath control, visions of light, and inner sound. (...) Although aspects of these practices are much older, *hatha-yoga* as a complete system was developed from about the ninth century CE by the Nath or Kanphata sect, which traces its origins to a saint, Matsyendranath, revered also in Buddhism (...).” See (Flood 1996, 96 and 98)

²⁰³ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 95-96)

metta practices found in Theravada Buddhism, which are also called compassion meditation or loving-kindness meditation. The practice starts out with mindfulness of the breath to calm and stabilize the mind. Then, the practitioner tries to invoke feelings of kindness and love towards first oneself, then someone he cares about, then someone he might have a particular problem with, “someone we do *not* like to feel sympathy for.”²⁰⁴ The point is to purposefully forgive and let go of anger, hatred, fear or whatever tension there might be between the practitioner and someone else. To visualize other people, especially those we dislike, as people with similar feelings, aspirations, pains and worries can help with forgiveness, either of others or of ourselves and our past mistakes against another person or maybe even towards ourselves. We can take the practice even further, expanding it towards those we do not know, maybe the less fortunate than us, and eventually we can even bring the meditation to include the whole planet and every living thing on it. The practice is brought to a close by coming back to the breathing, and “cradling our feelings of warmth and generosity and love for all beings in our own hearts.”²⁰⁵ The effects of loving-kindness meditation can be, according to Kabat-Zinn, that we become kinder and more forgiving towards both ourselves and to others, and it can increase our capacity for empathy, meaning that we can better understand the motivations of others and appreciate the need of treating other living beings with love and kindness.

Finally, the MBSR course underlines the importance of cultivating mindfulness in daily life²⁰⁶ – not just during the eight week programme, but also afterwards. Whatever one is doing, whether it is eating, talking, walking etc., one can always practice present-mindedness. Importantly, mindfulness can be interpreted as a *techne* insofar as it is both a system of practices but also a craft of life, a way of being through which one can purportedly learn to better cope, self-regulate, and handle whatever comes along in the “full catastrophe” of life. Seeing as the techniques for cultivating mindfulness taught in the MBSR programme are generally quite accessible and easy to approach, it is not hard to imagine why they have enjoyed such success²⁰⁷ since the start of the Stress Reduction clinic in 1979. I would argue that this combined with Kabat-Zinn’s insistence on the need for making the practice your own through experimentation – what I call technical mysticism – are central factors that have contributed to making mindfulness practices among the most practiced contemplative

²⁰⁴ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 183)

²⁰⁵ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 183)

²⁰⁶ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, pp. 132-139)

²⁰⁷ (Kabat-Zinn and Williams 2013, 2-5)

techniques in the world today. Also of importance is Kabat-Zinn's "translational" work, his effective re-phrasing of Buddhist vocabulary into concepts understandable to laypeople.

5.4 Conclusion: Health-beneficial Techniques as Religious Substitute?

Mindfulness, then, is a set of practices derived from mainly Buddhist traditions that have been accommodated to fit a Western audience. Accordingly, Kabat-Zinn does not view MSBR as a decontextualization of the dharma, but rather as an attempt to recontextualize it in its essential fullness. I have traced the links between the Pali equivalent of mindfulness (*sati*) and its relation to the technical meditation word *vipassana*, to the modern context of MBSR.

Through a process of adapting and translating various practices known under these terms, by refocusing them to the concerns of the modern West (how to stay healthy and reduce stress), Kabat-Zinn successfully created a fitting system of contemplative practice suited for the 21st century. I have argued that there are three main reasons for the success of mindfulness: (i) its compliance with the subjectivization thesis and the zeitgeist of our times; (ii) its accessibility and down-to-earth easy-to-understand guidelines; and most importantly (iii) its emphasis on technical mysticism.

Mindfulness is also a textbook example of my technification thesis, as it shows how development of religious practices from different traditions can co-mingle and arise in the context of one individual's transformative experience. The phenomenon of 20th-century Asian reform or revivalist Buddhist movements themselves²⁰⁸ (which Kabat-Zinn represents), with their emphasis on the practicable, instrumental and individualistic elements of Buddhism as opposed to the institutional and the overly intellectual elements, can be interpreted as a form of technification. This indicates that cultural exchanges can play a significant role in the technification process.

²⁰⁸ This include not only the *vipassana* movements, but also various forms of Vajrayana (especially Tibetan) and Zen Buddhism. See (Sharf 1995)

6 Case study B: From Mindfulness to Christfulness

As a Christian I miss a transcendent dimension in Mindfulness, that can dissolve the inner tension between conscious presence (*opmærksomt nærvær*) and non-judgment (*ikke-dømmen*).
– Ole S. Madsen (2012)²⁰⁹

In this chapter, I will examine the conception of *christfulness*. To do this, I will use the only available textual material about christfulness, namely a short introduction booklet published by the main architect of the term in 2012, a booklet simply called *christfulness*. In addition, the respective websites of the two organizations that are directly involved in the spread of this praxis will also be used as primary source materials, namely www.imesterenslyd.dk and www.areopagos.no. These websites reveal vital information on the issues, history and origins, doctrines, organizational structure, courses, lectures, seminars, etc. of these two organizations.

6.1 The Origins of Christfulness

Christfulness is an expression coined by the Danish Christian minister Ole Skjerbæk Madsen, applied for the first time in Copenhagen in November 2011, at a convention called “The Universe of Mysticism”²¹⁰. Based on very positive feedback on both the term and the various practices taught and associated with it in 2011 and 2012, Madsen decided to develop the concept further. The result became what we have today – a concept called christfulness that embodies the most common forms of the abovementioned mindfulness practices (see chapter 5), mixed together with Orthodox spiritual contemplative practices, especially the Jesus prayer. At first glance, the christfulness-practices seem like a Christ-centric form of mindfulness – a Christian alternative to the world’s arguably most popular contemplative technique –, but in reality, it is much richer and more complex.

In his explanation of why he thinks there is a need for christfulness as a Christian practice, Madsen writes, “Christfulness encapsulates a biblically based understanding of man as

²⁰⁹ (Madsen 2012, 7) My own translation from the Danish, which will be done in every subsequent quotation from this same book.

²¹⁰ (Madsen 2012, 4)

person, i.e. that man is not only understood out of himself, but also out of his relations – to God and to other people.”²¹¹ Madsen is not skeptical of mindfulness per se – in fact, he calls it a complementary practice to christfulness, and praises its ability to increase conscious awareness and stimulate a non-judgmental attitude. Although “many practitioners point out mindfulness as a religious neutral practice,”²¹² Madsen disagrees with this and argues that mindfulness cannot be fully divorced from its Buddhist origins. He assesses the two main developing trajectories that the whole mindfulness system has gone through: (i) – “Mindfulness (...) as a secularized form of Eastern spirituality,”²¹³ and (ii) – “Mindfulness is also a part of the wave of popularized and secularized Buddhism, coming to the fore in our time’s postmodern and fluctuating spiritual and therapeutic environments.”²¹⁴ Madsen points out a very important element of the modern Mindfulness Movement’s Buddhist roots: that mindfulness can lead to an experience of emptiness, which can be interpreted both in a positive and negative way. Positive, in the sense that one is freed from the illusions that bind us to the shackles of the past and the future, in short, that keeps us trapped in the world of the senses. In the negative sense, emptiness can feel like a dissolving of the personality or the ego. This can be very unpleasant and feel threatening.

A last but crucial element of Madsen’s “critique” of mindfulness is that it is missing a transcendent dimension. Awareness, non-judgmental presence and the loosening up of old engrained habits are commonly described qualities of both mindfulness and christfulness, and for this reason, they are seen as complementary practices. However, if there is no transcendent dimension to the practice, no normative force (whether it is a Christian Deity or practices of compassion and loving-kindness), there is always a danger that the non-judgmental attitude can lead to “a disengaged relationship to your fellow beings and the suffering of the world, an acceptance of the status quo, a fatalistic attitude to life.”²¹⁵ In other words, there is an inner tension between non-judgment and awareness or conscious presence. This tension comes about because the former can induce apathy, while the latter is usually conducive for developing empathy. In traditional Buddhism, this tension is resolved by cultivating loving-kindness (i.e. compassion), usually referred to as *metta* practices in Theravada Buddhism, and *tonglen* (giving and taking) in Tibetan Buddhism. *Metta* practices are also taught in some

²¹¹ (Madsen 2012, 7)

²¹² (Madsen 2012, 6-7)

²¹³ (Madsen 2012, 6)

²¹⁴ (Madsen 2012, 6)

²¹⁵ (Madsen 2012, 8)

modern mindfulness contexts (e.g. MBSR-courses), but the most common understanding of mindfulness today, based on Kabat-Zinn's famous operational definition, does not include the expressed cultivation of empathy. As I discussed in the last chapter, many contemporary Buddhists would agree with Madsen's critique of mindfulness' potential lack of ethical impetus. The ethical force of christfulness lies in it being grounded on a biblical interpretation of man as a relational being – “not just understood out of himself, but also out of his relations – to God and to other people.”²¹⁶ Christian ontology differs radically from Buddhism, and Madsen argues that for the Christian “there is nothing illusory about life in the world, for the world is created and willed by God. And as created in the image of God, man stands in a serving relationship to his fellow creation.”²¹⁷ From the Christian perspective, cultivating a non-judgmental attitude to our fellow beings is done by following the example of the way Christ interacted with other people. “The Christian lives in an I-You-relation to God.”²¹⁸ This relationship must be reflected in the relation to co-beings and co-creation, and it is precisely this transcendence, according to Madsen, that mindfulness is missing²¹⁹. With christfulness, Madsen seeks to express a relation to his fellow man and fellow creation impressed by Christ, “by his presence and appreciative attitude towards people on their path.”²²⁰

6.2 The *techne* of Christfulness

To understand the practices involved in christfulness, we first need to comprehend and clearly define what christfulness is. Madsen describes christfulness like being “filled or saturated by Christ, surrounded and fully pierced by him.”²²¹ Christfulness is understood as a process consisting of several phases – not just happening necessarily once or at specific one-time-only peak events, but rather as a continuous spiraling movement. Madsen himself describes sometimes reaching a particular silence and hearing the voice of Christ when he meditates on words and stories from the Bible. He calls these inspirations, to avoid misrepresenting himself

²¹⁶ (Madsen 2012, 7)

²¹⁷ (Madsen 2012, 8)

²¹⁸ (Madsen 2012, 8)

²¹⁹ (Madsen 2012, 8)

²²⁰ (Madsen 2012, 8)

²²¹ (Madsen 2012, 9)

as a 100% pure channel for God, and clarifies that these inspirations are distinct from prophecy or other gifts of revelation.²²²

Madsen separates four distinct components or phases of christfulness, representing different aspects and stages of contemplative development. He writes: “(...) Christfulness

begins as an experience of God’s love in Christ as a protecting and guiding presence (*Christ with me*)

is an experience of “Christ in me, the hope of glory [*herlighedens håp*]” (*Christ in me*)

helps you to see Christ or God’s image in your fellow man (*Christ in you*), and

leads to a vision of a redeemed [*forløst*] humanity as the Body of Christ (*I/we in Christ*)”²²³

As we can see from these four components or stages, the very first one, *Christ with me*, starts with an experience of God’s love in Christ, an experience of “safety and certainty of being a child of God.”²²⁴ The practices that can be involved in this stage include meditation on the Bible, affirmations and prayers, and a specific christfulness mantra.²²⁵ The second stage, *Christ in me*, has classically been realized by practicing the Jesus prayer of the Hesychasts, also called “the prayer of the heart.”²²⁶ The advantages of the Jesus prayer lies in its simplicity according to Madsen²²⁷, and breathing patterns and physical postures can be combined and synchronized with different parts of the prayer as aids for concentration. The prayer itself goes as follows in the Orthodox Church: *Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner*. Other versions are shorter and more popular, like this one: (*Lord*) *Jesus Christ, have mercy on me*.²²⁸ Clearly influenced by the Orthodox tradition, Madsen argues for the necessity of healing the heart and thereby realizing that “every human being is

²²² (Madsen 2012, 14)

²²³ (Madsen 2012, 9)

²²⁴ (Madsen 2012, 13)

²²⁵ «Christ in the front, Christ in the back, Christ to the right, Christ to the left, Christ under me, Christ over me, Christ around me, Christ in me.» [*Kristus foran, Kristus bakved, Kristus til højre, Kristus til venstre, Kristus under mig, Kristus over mig, Kristus omkring mig, Kristus I mig.*] (Madsen 2012, 16)

²²⁶ Hesychasm can be called the spiritual tradition of the Orthodox Church, derived from the Greek word *hésuchía* which translates as “stillness”, and usually “inner stillness”. This Orthodox spiritual tradition, with its focus on prayer and cleansing of the heart, was not called Hesychasm until the 14th-century, but it goes back to at least the 4th century, to the Desert Fathers and Mothers in Egypt, Palestine and Greece, wherefrom it then spread to Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine and Russia.

See (Deseille, Wetlesen, and Hellige Trifon 2013, The whole book is relevant, but particularly Part I, which covers the historical development, pp. 41-101).

²²⁷ (Madsen 2012, 24)

²²⁸ (Laursen 2013, 73)

created in God's image with the purpose of growing to Godliness."²²⁹ To do this, to realize *Christ in me*, Madsen says that the inner human needs to reflect "God in God's request to me."²³⁰ The mirror of the inner human is covered by everything that separates us from God – this is mainly conceptions we have of God, ourselves and other people that often create distance between ourselves and everything else and do not necessarily reflect reality – and this happens because of objectification, according to Madsen.²³¹ When we have made other people and God into mere things or objects, we immediately separate ourselves from the present moment and live in the past or the future, missing out on God's presence available in the now – all because we have made these things into "something to want to own, something to fear, something to win, something to lose."²³² Through prayer, especially the Jesus prayer²³³, through aids for concentration and narrowing our focus, accessing the present moment becomes easier. Then, being in the present moment, one can more easily lay aside those distractions and false impressions and just be. Leaving all impressions and thoughts behind can be scary and feel lonely, but Madsen stresses that one is not alone – because "Christ is in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1,27).

Christ in you is the natural progression from the two latter phases. From the experience of *Christ with me*, the first phase, one gains reassurance and faith in the presence of God in one's own life, which according to Madsen leads naturally to the second phase of *Christ in me*. Christfulness leads to a conscious presence in the world, through Christ-awareness. This awareness then makes us see Christ in others. "We scout for God's image in the other. That is why Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us."²³⁴ Through this third phase, we can learn to break our conceptions of other people as enemies, especially when dealing with people of other faiths or when we feel that "people abuse parts of our faith practice and mixes it with what to us seem like alien expressions of faith."²³⁵ In this phase,

²²⁹ (Madsen 2012, 17 & 17-24)Madsen, O. S. *Christfulness* (2012). p. 17 and 17-24. Madsen's arguments regarding deification (*theosis*), contemplation (*theoria*) and the necessity of seeing God's image in oneself resemble those found in (Deseille, Wetlesen, and Hellige Trifon 2013, 105-166, 249-263)

²³⁰ (Madsen 2012, 17)

²³¹ (Madsen 2012, 18)

²³² (Madsen 2012, 18)

²³³ It is important to note, however, that Madsen explicitly mentions that some technical feature is not the most important factor in this practice, but rather to "maintain awareness on Jesus, thinking about him and consequently "saying" his name." (Madsen 2012, 24)

²³⁴ (Madsen 2012, 24)

²³⁵ (Madsen 2012, 25)

practices of being present, visualizing Christ, and the Disciple prayer²³⁶, are all meant to deepen that sense of brotherhood and fraternity in seeing Christ in others. This shows a rather radical religious tolerance, but which makes sense when considering the organizational background of Madsen, which will be discussed in the next section. Finally, the fourth and final stage of christfulness, *I/we in Christ*, is related to a vision or inspiration Madsen had about the Eucharist as an expression for the community in Christ, as part of one body sharing the hope of a renewed and redeemed humanity.²³⁷

The aims of christfulness are both personal and grand. The main purpose, writes Madsen, is “to describe a process that moves from an individual experience to a vision for the salvation of mankind and the healing of our planet – in an ongoing interaction between the individual and the relational, the personal and the universal.”²³⁸ Through the abovementioned christfulness-practices, one can supposedly find answers to major questions such as: what is a human being? Who am I? What is the meaning of life? The practices that might produce answers to such questions include visualizations, meditations – on bible passages, on the life of Christ, etc., prayers – including affirmations and intercessions, regulation of the breath, recitation, body awareness and present-mindedness. Christfulness is, in other words, a myriad of spiritual practices²³⁹ that are meant to help an individual to be attentive and non-judgmental

²³⁶ The Disciple prayer is an expression within the IML to see Christ in other people. The prayer is preferably done at 5pm on a daily basis, “as many people in the New Age communities are praying for the healing of the earth and humanity and especially for the unity between people of good will.” The prayer goes like this:

*“God, you who are like I am!
I recognize the work of your Spirit
In man’s longing for the peace of your Kingdom,
- for the true, the beautiful and the good.
I recognize the presence of your serving love
in men of good will and in everyone,
who wishes to walk the path of discipleship.
May the power of your Holy Spirit flow in us and guide us
To the acknowledgement of all truth and in practical service.
May your Word become-flesh, Jesus Christ, inspire us
To serving love as co-workers for God’s Kingdom.
May I find my place in your one act
For the salvation of man and the earth
- With a humble mind, in purity, truth and love.”* (Madsen 2012, 25)

²³⁷ (Madsen 2012, 29-32)

²³⁸ (Madsen 2012, 4)

²³⁹ One example of this is what Madsen calls a *Christfulness-meditation*, which includes concentration on the breath, present-mindedness, visualization, body awareness and prayer. It starts out in prayer to Christ asking for the Holy Spirit for guidance, then goes into relaxation and body awareness and breath regulation, then visualization of first the heart, then once a sense of calm is reached, one starts visualizing Christ in front of you, and his open heart towards you. The next steps involve shifting focus over to the breath again, using every out-breath to let go of everything that weighs you down, old impressions of yourself, others, God, etc., and

towards oneself, other people, and God. It is a contemplative interpretation of the Gospel (and the bible generally), and an attempt to embody the teachings of Christ through a harmonic combination of the missiological and ascetic ideals of Christianity.

6.3 Areopagos' meditation project and the IML [*Mesterens Lys*]

It is no coincidence that there seem to be strong linkage between christfulness and so-called New Age spirituality, the latter especially characterized by its openness and syncretic nature. To further understand why christfulness entails such an open and tolerant view on other religions and spiritual practices, we need to look at the Christian organizations Areopagos and the IML.

Areopagos is an organization founded by the Norwegian Christian missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952), who spent several decades in China. In 1926 he founded The Nordic Christian Buddhist Mission (or the Nordic-East Asia Mission) which was later renamed Areopagos. Deeply influenced and fascinated by Chinese culture and spirituality, Reichelt would develop a way of spreading the gospel that was more tolerant and inclusive of the already existent tradition in the place of missionary activity, in this case Chinese Buddhism and Daoism. His views on missionary work became the inspiration for the interfaith work Areopagos does to this day. According to their website, Areopagos define themselves as “an organisation that works with religious dialogue and studies, Christian spirituality and relief. We started in 1922, and now work in Norway, Denmark, China and Hongkong.”²⁴⁰ The main goal of Areopagos is to share the gospel in a religiously pluralistic and secularised world. They offer an ecumenical service grounded on a Lutheran heritage, and have throughout the years worked with creating a dialogical approach to people of other faiths than Christian, establishing a spirituality fertilized in the meeting between Christian and Eastern spirituality,

consequently using every in-breath to receive peace, happiness and love from the open heart of Jesus Christ. Also, for every in-breath, you imagine your heart and mind being cleansed more and more, and Christ increasingly taking residence in your heart and mind. When the practice comes to a close, the finishing out-breaths should be used to send out the peace and joy of Jesus Christ to the world around you. The practice is finished by saying this prayer: “May God’s peace, which surpasses all reason, keep our hearts and thoughts in Christ Jesus, our Lord.” (Madsen 2012, 34)

²⁴⁰ URL: <http://www.areopagos.no/>

studying Eastern religiosity and spiritual currents affected by it, and doing diaconal work meeting people in need of relief. Together with their Chinese partners, Areopagos wants to ground the Christian gospel in Chinese culture and spirituality. In Scandinavia, the organisation wants to be a link between Christianity and other faith groups, and works for increased dialogue and the establishment of faith praxis involving contemplation, insight and respect for creation, and meditation.²⁴¹

In 2013, Areopagos started a meditation project. This project, which is ongoing until 2015, intends to re-actualize and normalize meditation as a Christian practice, and make it more accessible to the public. To do this, Areopagos will: “elaborate, clarify and express what meditation is; collect and adapt experiences with different forms of meditation; make the Christian traditions of meditation relevant in today’s search for life mastery and for finding meaning and deeper understanding; motivate churches and church organizations and institutions to open up for meditation and use it in their work.”²⁴² The project does not only want to create a buzz of new activity, but also aims to express values and principles. The following values are underlined as particularly important in the project description: “Faith practice – to live close to God and one’s true self; discover God’s presence in everything; God’s incomprehensiveness – mysticism; maturation of faith; deeper mastery of life, healing from within; unity in Jesus Christ.” The principles guiding the project are: “Praxis-oriented; reflection and studies; spiritual guidance; wandering together [*medvandring*] and dialogue; co-action and network.”²⁴³

The IML, or In the Light of the Master [*I Mesterens Lys*], is an Areopagos practice, dedicated to building bridges between Christians and people of alternative environments, and to be a community of disciples of Jesus in the new spiritual environments. “IML started in Copenhagen in 1995 with “spiritual meetings” and has since developed into a wide-reaching work in Denmark and Norway.”²⁴⁴ IML was started by Ole Skjerbæk Madsen, the originator of christfulness, who also is the leader of the organization today.²⁴⁵

²⁴¹ URL: <http://areopagos.no/om-areopagos/hvem-er-vi/verdigrunnlag-og-visjon>

²⁴² URL: <http://www.meditasjoner.no/om-meditasjonsprosjektet>

²⁴³ URL: <http://www.meditasjoner.no/om-meditasjonsprosjektet>

²⁴⁴ (Madsen 2012, 46)

²⁴⁵ URL: <http://www.imesterenslys.dk/om-i-mesterens-lys>

6.4 Conclusion: The Transformation of Religious Terminology

In this chapter, I have researched what christfulness is, its relation to mindfulness, and the organisational background from which it came. Christfulness can be called a *techne* insofar as it gives an account or rationale for its practices, and because it emphasizes the technical aspects over the theoretical (one example of this is that about half of Madsen's booklet consists solely of practical how-to and manuals for christfulness practice). It is therefore a very good example of technification (as defined in chapter 4), because of its superior focus on the mystical-intuitive element of Christianity, at the expense of the intellectual and institutional elements. Christfulness is similar to mindfulness in form, but has in addition a transcendent dimension, which gives it an ethical impetus that critics say is lacking in modern mindfulness practice. Christfulness as a myriad of different approaches to contemplative practices interpreted through the gospels. It is worth noting that even though the praxis can be called non-denominational – i.e., a practice that works for all Christians and non-Christians – almost all of the practices described in the primary text presuppose a Trinitarian view of God. This, of course, could exclude Non-Trinitarian groups.

There is no doubt, and Madsen also attests to, that the word christfulness is a way of “rebranding” an already popular term, mindfulness, and use the latter's inherent popularity as an advertising strategy. Because christfulness is such a new term, it is too early to tell whether it will catch on and spread like wildfire as its more popular name-brother has done since the 1990s. The future success or failure of christfulness will most likely hinge on whether christfulness practice will take hold among the people and rebranders of Christian contemplative practice in Scandinavia. Areopagos' current meditation project certainly makes such a scenario possible, and there is no clear sign that the trend towards more technicity of religion will cease anytime soon.

7 Case Study C: From Contemplative to Centering Prayer

*Gud er alltid i presens.*²⁴⁶

–Hilde Sanden-Bjønnes, Centering prayer instructor

Centering prayer [is] a contemporary form of prayer of the heart, prayer of simplicity, prayer of faith, prayer of simple regard; a method of reducing the obstacles to the gift of contemplative prayer and of facilitating the development of habits conducive to responding to the inspirations of the Spirit.

– Thomas Keating²⁴⁷

Centering prayer is a relatively new name for an old form of prayer with roots going all the way back to the earliest stages of Christendom. It is a modernized form of classical contemplative prayer developed and popularized by three American Cistercian monks, namely William Meninger, M. Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating²⁴⁸. In the following, I will explore what the historical roots are between contemplative and centering prayer, and examine the definition of centering prayer, how one practices it, and the supposed outcomes that can be expected from such practicing. I will base my investigation on two major works by Thomas Keating. The first, *Open Mind, Open Heart – The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (1992), details the technicalities of the practice, and how to implement it in daily life. The other work, *Invitation to Love – The Way of Christian Contemplation* (2006), is described as a kind of road map of the contemplative path, a thorough run-through of what to expect (and not to expect) once one starts practicing centering prayer seriously. These books are collected in a trilogy (*Foundations for Centering Prayer and the Christian Contemplative Life*, 2002), but are sufficient for the purposes of this chapter, which is to look at the technical aspects of centering prayer.

Thomas Keating (b. 1923) is a priest, monk and abbot who currently resides at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado. He is founder of the Centering Prayer Movement and of

²⁴⁶ "God is always in the present tense." Translated from the Norwegian. Personal correspondence.

²⁴⁷ (Keating 2002, 123)

²⁴⁸ (Laursen 2013, 31)

Contemplative Outreach²⁴⁹, the latter being an organization intent on fostering “the process of transformation in Christ in one another through the practice of Centering prayer.”²⁵⁰ The organization’s website, www.contemplativeoutreach.org/, will also be used as primary source material for this chapter.

7.1 From Christian Coenobitism²⁵¹ to Laymen’s Spirituality

To understand the difference between contemplative and centering prayer, it is necessary to look at how the popularizers of centering prayer – i.e. Thomas Keating et al. – understand the term contemplation. Keating argues that contemplation is an ambiguous term that has espoused several meanings over the centuries. He traces a line of biblical translation and commentary going from the Hebrew *da’ath* to the Greek term *gnosis*, and then to the Greek Fathers’ incorporation of the Neoplatonist term *theoria*, which in its Latin form is translated as *contemplatio*. *Da’ath* indicates an intimate kind of knowledge of God through love “involving the whole person, not just the mind.”²⁵² In the Greek Bible, the translation for this Hebrew term is *gnosis*, to emphasize the experiential knowledge of God. Furthermore, the usage of *gnosis* in the Epistles of St. Paul refers according to Keating to “the knowledge of God proper to those who love Him.”²⁵³ The Greek Church Fathers, especially Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Origen, borrowed the term *theoria* – originally meaning the intellectual vision of truth – from the Neoplatonists²⁵⁴, but added the meaning of the

²⁴⁹ “Inspired by the decree of Vatican II,” three monks – Fathers Thomas Keating, William Meninger, and Basil Pennington – “wished to develop a method of Christian contemplative prayer that was appealing and accessible to laypeople. (...) As abbot of St. Joseph’s Abbey, Fr. Keating attended a meeting in Rome in 1971. At the meeting, Pope Paul VI called on the members of the clergy to revive the contemplative dimension of the Gospel in the lives of both monastic and laypeople. Believing in the importance of this revival, Fr. Keating encouraged the monks at St. Joseph’s to develop a method of Christian contemplative prayer with the same appeal and accessibility that Eastern meditation practices seemed to have for modern people. A monk at the abbey named William Meninger found the background for such a method in the anonymous fourteenth-century classic *The Cloud of the Unknowing*.” *The prayer was first called The Prayer of the Cloud, but the name of the prayer was later changed to Centering Prayer* “alluding to Thomas Merton’s description of contemplative prayer as prayer that is “centered entirely on the presence of God...His will...His love...[and] Faith by which alone we can know the presence of God. (...) In 1986, the three monks’ experiment was incorporated as Contemplative Outreach, LTD.” For more details, see URL: <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/history-contemplative-outreach>

²⁵⁰ See URL: <http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/vision>

²⁵¹ From the Greek *koinos* (common) and *bios* (life), i.e. “communal life”.

²⁵² (Keating 2002, 20)

²⁵³ I(Keating 2002, 20)

²⁵⁴ Greek philosophy, and particularly Neoplatonism, had a huge influence on the development of especially early, but also later Christian thinkers and theology. See (Keating 2002, 20-21) and (Finan and Twomey 1992)

Hebrew *da'ath* to it. Thus, the term *theoria* in its expanded meaning – denoting the experiential knowledge of God through love – was translated into the “Latin *contemplatio* and handed down to us in the Christian tradition.”²⁵⁵

The most common form of prayer advocated for both monastics and laypeople alike in the first centuries of Christianity was according to Keating the method called *lectio divina*, literally meaning “divine reading.”²⁵⁶ This was a practice of reading, listening and reflecting on scripture, involving the body in the process of ever-deepening focused attention on the material they were reading and reciting. Keating describes the process of *lectio divina*:

The reflective part, pondering upon the words of the sacred text, was called *meditatio*, “meditation”. The spontaneous movement of the will in response to these reflections was called *oratio*, “affective prayer”. As these reflections and acts of will simplified, one moved on to a state of resting in the presence of God, and that is what was meant by *contemplatio*, “contemplation”. These three acts – discursive meditation, affective prayer and contemplation – might all take place during the same period of prayer. They were interwoven one into the other.²⁵⁷

In other words, contemplation took on the meaning of an advanced superlative stage of prayer, a type of resting in the presence of God. Indeed, ascetical practices “were always directed toward contemplation as the proper goal of every spiritual practice.”²⁵⁸ This meaning of contemplation was upheld until the end of the Middle Ages.

In the 12th century, the advent of scholasticism and the development of the great schools of theology meant an increased focus on analysis and Aristotelian pedantry. While this shift and development in intellectual history meant better philosophical sophistication, it also initiated the end of the simple understanding of prayer. Over the next centuries, the complexity of prayer methods and the categories involved in prayer analysis increased rapidly. During the 16th-century, the term *mental prayer* appeared, and prayer

came to be divided into discursive meditation if thoughts predominated; affective prayer if the emphasis was on acts of the will; and contemplation if graces infused by God were predominant. Discursive meditation, affective prayer and contemplation were no longer different acts found in a single period of prayer, but distinct forms of prayer, each with its own proper aim, method and purpose. This division of the development of prayer into compartmentalized units entirely separate from one another helped to further the incorrect notion that contemplation was an extraordinary grace reserved for the few. The possibility of prayer opening out into contemplation tended to be regarded as very unlikely. The organic

²⁵⁵ (Keating 2002, 20)

²⁵⁶ (Keating 2002, 21)

²⁵⁷ (Keating 2002, 21)

²⁵⁸ (Keating 2002, 21)

development of prayer toward contemplation did not fit into the approved categories and was therefore discouraged.²⁵⁹

This compartmentalization of Christian mental prayer in especially the Roman-Catholic tradition coincided with other historical developments. The extremely influential *Spiritual Exercises by Saint Ignatius*, which was written between 1522 and 1526, is essential according to Keating, for understanding the present state of spirituality in the Roman Catholic Church. Ignatius used the term contemplation differently than its traditional meaning. In the *Exercises*, contemplation means gazing upon a concrete object of the imagination – seeing the people of the Gospel “as if they were present, hearing what they are saying, relating and responding to their words and actions.”²⁶⁰ This method aims at developing affective prayer. Two other major methods of prayer are proposed in the *Exercises*, namely discursive meditation and the application of the five senses. However, the Jesuits themselves after Ignatius²⁶¹ contributed to a trend that, to a large extent, has reduced the *Exercises* to a manual of purely discursive meditation. In the Catholic world, the pervasive influence of the Jesuits in the post-Reformation era as the main representatives of the Counter-Reformation helps explain why not contemplative prayer, but only one of its heavily intellectualized components – i.e. discursive meditation – took root and spread as the main form of Christian spiritual practice in the world of Catholicism.²⁶²

Keating goes on to identify two additional historical reasons for why the focus on contemplative spirituality – understood in the traditional Christian sense as abiding with God, experientially, not just being an act of intellectual reflecting or “gazing” – diminished and increasingly lost support with the Roman Catholic authorities. One proposed important reason was the number of declared heresies or “species of false mysticisms” that occurred during the 17th century. Quietism (condemned in 1687 by Innocent XII²⁶³), semi-Quietism (condemned in France and blamed for bringing traditional mysticism into disrepute) and Jansenism (which

²⁵⁹ (Keating 2002, 22)

²⁶⁰ (Keating 2002, 23)

²⁶¹ “In 1574 Everard Mercurian, the Father General of the Jesuits, in a directive to the Spanish province of the Society, forbade the practice of affective prayer and the application of the five senses. This prohibition was repeated in 1578. The spiritual life of a significant portion of the Society of Jesus was thus limited to a single method of prayer, namely, discursive meditation (...). The predominantly intellectual character of this meditation continued to grow in importance throughout the Society during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Most manuals of spirituality until well into this century limited instruction to schemas of discursive meditation.” (Keating 2002, 23)

²⁶² It is worth pointing out, however, that the Jesuits also had their contemplative masters, not just St. Ignatius. Some of the most famous include: Fathers Lallemant, Surin, Grou and de Caussade.

²⁶³ (McGinn 2006b, 501-508)

left behind a pervasive anti-human attitude that continued well into our own century)²⁶⁴ all led to a further setback of Christian spirituality, according to Keating. A second reason, related to the aforementioned, was that contemplative prayer gradually came to be seen as an arrogant pursuit, something only for the spiritually elect, the religious virtuosi, the superhuman ascetic monks (and sometimes nuns), who comprised an infinitesimal minority of the Christian community.

From the abovementioned, it is clear that the term contemplation has undergone a noticeable change and development of meaning over the centuries. Traditionally, and certainly in the popular mind, one tends to think of contemplatives and contemplative practice as something confined to the walls of the cloister. Indeed, Christian mysticism and contemplative development has primarily been associated with coenobitical monks (i.e. monastics living in a community), as if contemplation were the prerogative of the clergy and the religious elite. However, today, and also in the first millennia of Christendom before the Great Schism of 1054, there existed a common Christian spirituality, as Keating and others have shown²⁶⁵. This spirituality was not just for the elite, but also for the laypeople. Contemplation was held as “the normal evolution of a genuine spiritual life”²⁶⁶ and was therefore open to all Christians.

Today, and in recent decades, the status and prominence of contemplation have begun to change. Keating believes there are two main reasons for this renewed interest in Christian contemplation. The first reason is that theological and historical studies have rediscovered and increasingly seen the value of the teachings of spiritual masters such as John of the Cross, John Cassian, and others²⁶⁷. The second reason is the challenge posed by the spiritual traditions of the East in the post-World War II era. The popularity and success of meditation-based traditions and of yoga system – many of which are contemplative and technically similar to the Christian contemplative tradition – have filled an obvious demand for spiritual nourishment in the West. Many methods of meditation have been very well received in the West, and have produced good results. Some methods have enjoyed a lot of publicity,

²⁶⁴ (Keating 2002, 24).

²⁶⁵ (Keating 2002, 28), and (Deseille, Wetlesen, and Hellige Trifon 2013, 15-18)

²⁶⁶ (Keating 2002, 25-26)

²⁶⁷ «The revival of mystical theology in the Roman Catholic Church began with the publication of *The Degrees of the Spiritual Life* by Abbe Saudreau in 1896. He based his research on John of the Cross.” (Keating 2002, 26)

particularly mindfulness²⁶⁸. In line with *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (Vatican II), Keating stresses the importance for Christian leaders and teachers to know about and appreciate the knowledge and methods of the Eastern spiritual traditions. This is primarily because they need to meet people “where they are today,”²⁶⁹ and it is not uncommon for the majority of spiritual seekers of the West today to have studied some of the wisdom from the East.

Keating argues that there is an overly intellectual bias in Western culture. He believes this has come about because of inclinations from the Cartesian-Newtonian world-view that likes and needs to analyze everything. The consequence has been a bottling up of the spontaneous mind and a repression of our intuitive faculties. “This conceptual hang-up of modern Western society,” says Keating “impedes the spontaneous movement from reflection to spontaneous prayer and from spontaneous prayer to interior silence (wonder and admiration).”²⁷⁰ Having observed what he calls the “intellectual bias” of Western culture in people who are into contemplative prayer, Keating believes that it is much deeper than most people realize, and that the “rush to the East”²⁷¹ is symptomatic of what is lacking in the West. So in response to critics who question whether it is in line with the tradition of contemplative prayer to focus purely on *contemplatio* (which is non-discursive), at the expense of *meditatio* (which is discursive), Keating responds that centering prayer is “an insight into a contemporary problem and an effort to revive the traditional Christian teaching on contemplative prayer.”²⁷² The contemporary problem is the intellectual bias and lack of intuitive spontaneity among modern and mainly Western practitioners. There is a need for an experiential refocus, a method or means of rediscovering the traditional teaching on contemplative prayer, which according to Keating can lead to experiences of God’s presence. That refocus from using a prayer of concentration (e.g. discursive meditation, which has been prevalent since the latter stages of medieval times) to instead apply a prayer of being (e.g. centering prayer, which has been popular for only a few decades), and methodically mapping out the ways to do so, is what centering prayer is all about. Therefore, Keating says that centering prayer is not something new that was invented in our day, but rather a new “packaging” or “branding” (my

²⁶⁸ For more on Mindfulness, the results of practicing it, and the ongoing *vipassana*-revival of Modern Buddhism, see chapter 5.

²⁶⁹ (Keating 2002, 26)

²⁷⁰ (Keating 2002, 29)

²⁷¹ (Keating 2002, 30)

²⁷² (Keating 2002, 30)

terms) of an old tradition, an attempt to update and put order and regularity to spiritual teachings (from e.g. *The Cloud of Unknowing*)²⁷³ that were perceived to have been lost since the Reformation, but turned out to be sorely needed in the modern era.

The idea of laypeople pursuing the spiritual path is not a new idea. However, it has not been popular in the Christian (particularly Catholic) world for the last millennia or so. According to Keating, this has roots going back to the institutionalization of monasticism after the example of desert Fathers such as that of St. Anthony, which pretty much solidified and standardized the notion that one had to leave the world in order to pursue the Christian path to divine union. However, some early Christian thinkers, such as Origen (4th-century) of the theological school of Alexandria, believed that the Christian community *in the world* (my emphasis) was the proper place for asceticism²⁷⁴. Nowadays, after a few decades of centering prayer increasingly making its impact felt on the consciousness of Christendom, there seems to be a shift away from the (latest) traditional view on how to best pursue the Christian inner life. Keating's adage on the essence of monastic life is probably partly responsible for this shift. He writes: "The essence of monastic life is not its structures but its interior practice, and the heart of interior practice is contemplative prayer."²⁷⁵ In this respect, it is clear that centering prayer reflects a democratizing inclusive view of the contemplative work. It is also an example of technification, as an expression of the experiential-intuitive and non-discursive elements of Christianity at the expense of, and partially as a reaction to, the institutional and intellectual (discursive) elements. Contemplation is not just something for those who forsake the world, but rather something for all believers and spiritual seekers. Even though belief in the central tenets of Christianity is considered elementary for Keating and other exponents of centering prayer, some practitioners and teachers of the prayer method believe that also non-Christians can (and should) practice centering prayer. Supposedly, centering prayer can be efficacious and suitable for non-Christians as well, because of its non-discursive nature.²⁷⁶ If this is true, then the practice is obviously fitting for ecumenical and dialogical purposes.

²⁷³ (Keating 2002, 118)

²⁷⁴ (Keating 2002, 28)

²⁷⁵ (Keating 2002, 28)

²⁷⁶ Personal correspondence with Methodist pastor and long-term Centering prayer instructor.

7.2 The *techne* of Centering Prayer

The *techne* of centering prayer is about why and how one practices it. According to Keating, the purpose of centering prayer is “not to experience peace but to evacuate the unconscious obstacles to the permanent abiding state of union with God. Not contemplative *prayer* but the contemplative *state* is the purpose of our practice.”²⁷⁷ A single-event experience or vision, a life changing revelation or moment of spiritual awakening is not the main aim. Rather, the purpose of practicing centering prayer is to reach “the permanent and abiding awareness of God that comes through the mysterious restructuring of consciousness. (...) The restructuring of consciousness is the fruit of regular practice.”²⁷⁸ Thus, through regular practice, it is supposedly possible to abide in God-presence at all times. Further, a person who is seriously practicing contemplative prayer initiates a development of inner transformation. The transformative power of contemplation is tangible yet so pure, that according to Keating it is “not perceptible to the one receiving it.”²⁷⁹ An individual who has undergone the full development of contemplative prayer will embody the gospel and the divine in ways superior to even the sacraments, according to Keating. As such, it is clear that the work of contemplative practice is the most important component of a Christian’s spiritual life and discipline.

Practicing centering prayer involves gradually changing one’s personality, but not just in a moral sense. “The inner dynamism of contemplative prayer leads naturally to the transformation of your whole personality. Its purpose is not limited to your moral improvement. It brings about a change in your way of perceiving and responding to reality.”

²⁸⁰ In other words, centering prayer can be seen as a cognitive and affective tool – cognitive because it will alter one’s understanding of reality; affective because it changes the way one feels, responds and relates to others, and one’s own feelings and emotions.

The quote at the start of this chapter is from the glossary of Keating’s instruction manual, wherein he defines centering prayer as “a contemporary form of prayer of the heart, prayer of simplicity, prayer of faith, prayer of simple regard.”²⁸¹ Appreciating the simple, non-

²⁷⁷ (Keating 2002, 86)

²⁷⁸ (Keating 2002, 86)

²⁷⁹ (Keating 2002, 92).

²⁸⁰ (Keating 2002, 83)

²⁸¹ (Keating 2002, 123)

discursive apophatic (darksome)²⁸² character of centering prayer is important to understand the technicalities of the practice. The practice is passive and non-forced in the sense that it aims to rest in the available present by opening oneself up to what is understood as the ultimate condition of reality – namely god. Centering prayer is “a method of reducing the obstacles to the gift of contemplative prayer and of facilitating the development of habits conducive to responding to the inspirations of the Spirit.”²⁸³ In other words, although being a contemplative practice, it is meant as a help to the active Christian life. The practice is receptive rather than concentrative, and hence its focal point is on non-doing instead of directed action, on acceptance instead of enforced control.

The actual technicalities of practicing centering prayer can be divided into four parts:

- (1) – Choosing a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God’s presence and action within.
- (2) – Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God’s presence and action within
- (3) – When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word internally (*This is the only activity we initiate during centering prayer*).
- (4) – At the end of the prayer, remain in silence with your eyes closed for a couple of minutes.²⁸⁴

The first step of choosing a sacred word is very individual. In other words, what word one chooses can change according to circumstance and disposition. However, it is important to stick to the same word for the duration of a practice, and generally, it is not recommended to switch around all the time. Keating recommends that an initial brief period of prayer to the Holy Spirit should be done, asking for inspiration to find a word that is especially suitable for us. It is preferable to use a short word with only one or two syllables. Examples of words that can be used include: Lord, Jesus, Abba, Father, Mother, Love, Peace, Hope, Shalom, Silence, Mercy, etc.

²⁸² Darksome is Keating’s term for apophatic, contrasting it to kataphatic (lightsome) contemplation. The traditional distinction between these two terms is misleading according to Keating, because “a proper preparation of the faculties (kataphatic practice) leads to apophatic contemplation, which in turn is sustained through appropriate kataphatic practice.” According to Keating, apophatic means “the exercise of pure faith; resting in God beyond concepts and particular acts, except to maintain a general loving attention to the divine presence,” whereas kataphatic means “the exercise of the rational faculties enlightened by faith; the affective response to symbols, reflection, and the use of reason, imagination, and memory in order to assimilate the truths of faith.” See (Keating 2002, 123). This will be discussed further in chapter 9.

²⁸³ See (Keating 2002, 123)

²⁸⁴ (Keating 2002, 118-119)

The second step involves reaching a calm state and preparing the body for deep silence. Keating maintains that it is better to choose a time of day to practice when one is not too drowsy or tired. The position of the body can vary, but the important thing is that it is comfortable enough to enjoy deep relaxation for a prolonged time, while not being too relaxed as to encourage sleep. The back should be kept straight during the practice. Then, once a certain bodily calm is established, one can “introduce the sacred word inwardly and as gently as laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.”²⁸⁵

The third step or element of centering prayer is the most important and the most difficult to grasp. It involves both letting go of one’s attachment to whatever thoughts (which for Keating is an umbrella term for every mental perception including sense perceptions, feelings, images, memories, reflections, and commentaries²⁸⁶) that might appear, and using the chosen sacred²⁸⁷ word to gently come back to the awareness of the present whenever it slips away. Indeed, the way the sacred word is used to re-focus oneself within the practice is the determining factor as to whether the prayer will work out successfully or not according to Keating.²⁸⁸ Therefore, a type of self-denial is essential in this practice, as one has to deny one’s attachments to all forms of mental movements, again and again – a process which is so habitual in the human consciousness that it quickly becomes clear to the practitioner that this is no easy task to accomplish. Essentially, the prayer is a path to or method of self-surrender²⁸⁹, through which one supposedly can learn to be less possessive, and eventually be able to let go of everything that is keeping you away from god, no matter how tempting the thought, reflection, insight or experience that is happening during the practice might be. According to Keating, it is important to stress that the sacred word is used as the intention to get in touch with god and continually bring oneself back to, and rest in, his omnipresence. Therefore the sacred word might become vague or even disappear during the course of the practice, as it does not implicitly represent the method itself, but is rather the intention behind one’s willingness to open up to the divine and experiment with the possibility of experiencing “divine therapy”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁵ (Keating 2002, 119)

²⁸⁶ (Keating 2002, 119)

²⁸⁷ It is considered sacred not because of its meaning, but because of its intent. See (Keating 2002, 40)

²⁸⁸ “The effectiveness of this prayer does not depend on how distinctly you say the sacred word or how often, but rather on the gentleness with which you introduce it into your imagination in the beginning and the promptness with which you return to it when you are hooked on some other thought.” See (Keating 2002, 96)

²⁸⁹ (Keating 2002, 98)

²⁹⁰ “The psyche begins to evacuate spontaneously the undigested emotional material of a lifetime, opening up new space for self-knowledge, freedom of choice, and the discovery of the divine presence within. As a

through such self-disciplining. If such complete inner stillness is achieved, the sacred word disappears completely, there are no thoughts, and one might experience an interior silence which Keating also calls “resting in God.”²⁹¹

The prayer is brought to a close by spending a few minutes with the eyes closed. An optional prayer, e.g. Our Father, can be done at the end. These additional minutes give the psyche time to readjust to the external world. Further, it is recommended that the practice should last at least 20 minutes, and be done twice a day. Most people will need time to properly relax and cultivate that inner stillness and presence. Keating applies the analogy of cultivating a new friendship – if you want to be well acquainted you need to invest time to get to know each other²⁹². Likewise, the practice of centering prayer needs time and experimentation on our behalf to bear fruits.

Finally, Keating makes a point to emphasize what contemplation (which he uses synonymously with centering prayer) is not. Centering prayer is not a technique, relaxation exercise, form of self-hypnosis, charismatic gift, parapsychological phenomenon, discursive meditation, affective prayer, nor limited to the “felt” presence of god.²⁹³ Rather, it is movement towards communion with Christ through a training of noticing god’s language (which is silence according to Keating) and presence; an essential and practical tool for “confronting the heart of Christian asceticism – namely, the struggle with our unconscious motivation – while at the same time establishing a climate and necessary dispositions for a deepening relationship with God and leading, if we persevere, to divine union.”²⁹⁴

7.3 Conclusion: “Gud er alltid i presens”

In this chapter I have tried to explicate the origin and practice of centering prayer, and how one of its main exponents, Thomas Keating, presents its methodology and relation to contemplative prayer and the history of Christian contemplative life since the Desert Fathers. Arguably, Keating’s insistence on the contemporary need for this non-discursive a-intellectual

consequence, a growing trust in God, a bonding with the Divine Therapist, enables us to endure the process.” See (Keating 2002, 133)

²⁹¹ A state which is “beyond thinking, images, and emotions. This awareness tells you that the core of your being is eternal and indestructible and that you as a person are loved by God and share his divine life.” See (Keating 2002, 99)

²⁹² (Keating 2002, 43)

²⁹³ (Keating 2002, 9-14)

²⁹⁴ (Keating 2002, 133)

contemplative practice and his emphasis on the spontaneous, intuitive and felt spirituality of contemplative trajectories generally, and centering prayer specifically, is an example of technification. Furthermore, I have tried to show that the practice of centering prayer underscores the importance of presence and non-doing, receptiveness and non-striving. It accentuates intention to receive rather than concentrated will to obtain, and is hence intentional but non-instrumental. Keating points out (although briefly) that there is a misleading distinction between apophatic (presence-oriented) and kataphatic (direction-oriented) contemplation, as they *de facto* comprise mutually dependent modalities of contemplation. This apparent paradox will be discussed in chapter 9.

In conclusion, centering prayer represents a novel (yet according to Keating traditional) piece of Christian tradition that interprets the Gospels contemplatively, and emphasizes the omnipresence and availability of god to the layperson and religious specialist alike. Through a process of de-habitualization, of removing everything that separates oneself from the Now, it is supposedly possible to invite god-presence into one's being. To do this however, requires humble openness and the understanding that god is always to be found in the present tense.

**PART III –
CRITICAL ANALYSES AND
CONCLUSIONS**

8 The Anatomy of Contemplative Practice

In this chapter, I will use the material summarized in part II as a contemplative database to address the main issue of this dissertation. The main issue of my research has been to examine how contemplative practice can be seen as a form of *techne*. As *techne* is related to the practical know-how and bringing forth of that which cannot bring itself about, the answer to this inquiry will be most clearly reached by dividing the analysis into three questions: 1) – what are the fundamental elements of contemplative practice, 2) – how well do they fit my definition of contemplative practice, and 3) – what can contemplative practice mean and entail for the practitioner? I shall argue that according to the material, there are significant and important similarities between these different systems of practice, despite some obvious dissimilarities. Based on my “mystical” hermeneutical reading and re-reading of the primary source material, and my practicing of the techniques prescribed therein, I shall endeavor to provide a comprehensive analysis of contemplative practice.

I will start out by summarizing the main similarities and differences between the cases in terms of their described technicalities, side-effects, aims, objects of focus, and potential worth. As will be shown, contemplative practice from an insider practitioner’s perspective is no magical pill or cure-all elixir. Certainly, its proponents stress the wonderful and positive effects contemplative practice might have in our lives, but importantly, they also underscore how the contemplative process can be paved with difficulties, bitterness, even danger. Finally, I will include the neuroscientific concept of neuroplasticity, which is important to evaluate in the discussion of what exactly contemplative practice can mean for the practitioner.

8.1 Comparing the cases – differences and similarities

According to William James, a substantial as well as functional similarity between all religions can be seen in the fact that they ascribe some problem to the human condition (e.g. sin/ignorance/disloyalty, etc.), and their own creed and practices as the solution to said problem²⁹⁵ (e.g. salvation through Christ/cultivation of insight/loyal submission to Allah’s

²⁹⁵ (James 2008 [1902], 355)

commandments). In the case of mindfulness, christfulness and centering prayer, the adverse condition is the fact that we do not live in the present moment. The remedies for this are their practices, which are supposed to increase our capacity to “come back” and “remain” in the present. In this Jamesian sense, even mindfulness can be understood as religious, although if we based our definition on von Hügel’s theory of religion, there would be a need to prove the institutional and mystical elements of mindfulness before such status could be declared.

The main difference between the cases, however, is undoubtedly the doctrinal and intellectual-speculative systems and rationalizations behind them. Whereas two are based on Christian metaphysics, the other (mindfulness) constitutes a mix of Buddhist, secular-humanist, Daoist, Krishnamurtian, and Advaita-Vedanta inspired (i.e. non-dualistic) ontologies. This obviously affects the discourse within which the contemplative practices are presented and the ultimate aims they are oriented towards.

It is the similarities, though, that stand out in the comparative study of the three cases. First, the proponents of these contemplative practices emphasize that they are not just for the “elect few” or some spiritual elite. Rather, these contemplative practices are open and accessible to anyone²⁹⁶ who searches for it. Thus, they offer a democratization of traditionally closed-in contemplative practices, now available and enthusiastically marketed to the world.

Second, they represent both a system of practice (i.e. praxis) and also a way and process of life²⁹⁷. Third, there is focus on independence from the ordinary psychological realm of thoughts and emotions through de-objectification (christfulness)²⁹⁸ and detachment (mindfulness and centering prayer). One of the ingredients in accomplishing this independence is related to the fourth similarity, which is an emphasis on receptive, non-concentrative effortless “presence,” through which one is further saturated in the present moment. This presence-ing is related and can lead to the fifth similarity, which is described as the revelation, realization or opening up to a new dimension of reality. Keating describes this

²⁹⁶ E.g. (Keating 2002, 38)

²⁹⁷ “Christfulness can be understood as a process, running through several phases.” (Madsen 2012, 9); (Keating 2002, 105-113); (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 132-146, 424-444).

²⁹⁸ (Madsen 2012, 18)

development as going from a black-and-white TV to full color – it is still the same picture, but it is greatly enhanced by the new dimension.²⁹⁹

When it comes to the side-effects of the contemplative practices, the texts describe quite a few. The positive side-effects described in all three cases can include deep relaxation (both bodily and mental); the ability to distinguish between your thoughts and emotions on one side, and your “true self” on the other side; a loosening up of old ingrained habits, which is related to increased and noticeable tolerance for change and unexpected events.³⁰⁰ The negative side-effects can include unpleasantness (all three); loneliness and despair (Madsen)³⁰¹; pressures, extreme sense of heaviness and/or lightness, and intense suffering (Keating)³⁰².

Based on Brown’s typology of the stages of meditation³⁰³ mentioned in chapter 2, it is especially (3) and (4) – i.e. concentration with and without support, respectively – that is most interesting in the cases under study. While ethical and mind/body training preliminaries are mentioned³⁰⁴ and recommended, they are not emphasized much at all in the primary sources. Instead, the loci of focus are on the different ways concentration is cultivated. Also emphasized are the aims and supposed outcomes of practicing, which can be related to (5) and (6) of Brown’s typology.

8.2 Aims

The aim shared by all the cases is the removal of all the obstacles that trap our minds in the past or future, and separate us from the present moment and hence god’s ever-abiding presence (Keating and Madsen), or the reality of the moment (Kabat-Zinn). This is done by cultivating full and effortless present-mindedness through either of the practices. Another shared aim is the transformative component of the contemplative practice, although the forms of the transformation differ significantly. Practicing can supposedly lead to life-altering

²⁹⁹ “It was present but not transmitted because the proper receptive apparatus was missing.” (Keating 2002, 34)

³⁰⁰ (Madsen 2012, 7)

³⁰¹ (Madsen 2012, 19)

³⁰² (Keating 2002, 92)

³⁰³ “(1) Preliminary Ethical training, (2) Preliminary Mind/Body training, (3) Concentration With Support, (4) Concentration Without Support, (5) Ordinary Insight Meditation, (6) Extraordinary Mind and Enlightenment.” (Brown 1986, 223)

³⁰⁴ (Keating 2002, 119), (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 31-113)

transformations in the form of “divine union” (Keating)³⁰⁵, the redemption of humanity through Christ (Madsen)³⁰⁶, and insight into the unity, wholeness and connectedness of our minds and bodies (Kabat-Zinn)³⁰⁷.

8.3 Objects of focus

According to Eifring the objects of focus (or building blocks) for meditation can be separated into three categories: 1) “the location of the object, 2) the degree of agency of the meditator, and 3) the mental faculty (or faculties) involved in perceiving and producing the object.”³⁰⁸ This works well for contemplative practices as well. In the case studies we find objects of focus that are bodily (contemplative/mindful walking³⁰⁹) and internally self-generated and spontaneous (centering prayer and mindfulness), affective (christfulness, and loving-kindness meditation in mindfulness), cognitive and sensory as well as both concentrative and non-concentrative (all). The effortless non-directionality of focus, the notion of open monitoring, is emphasized most in mindfulness and centering prayer. These latter practices focus mostly on acceptance and a continuous coming-back-to the present moment, non-forcefully and gently using concentration and self-reminding (the sacred word in the case of centering prayer) as a gateway back to awareness. Christfulness, which is the newest and least conceptually developed praxis of the three cases, is more explicitly occupied with the cultivation of affective, sensory (especially visual and auditory) and the linguistic-symbolic features of contemplative objects of focus, and thereby retains a more distinct Abrahamittic³¹⁰ character.

8.4 Buddha’s samadhi-trifecta

There seems to be a tripartite view of the main ingredients needed for successful contemplation in several traditions. According to the *Anguttaranikaya*³¹¹ of the Pali canon, Buddha Shakyamuni supposedly stated that a heightened or noble mind should make his mind

³⁰⁵ (Keating 2002, 42)

³⁰⁶ (Madsen 2012, 8-9)

³⁰⁷ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 149-219)

³⁰⁸ (Eifring 2014, 9)

³⁰⁹ (Keating 2002, 105) and (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 114-119)

³¹⁰ In the sense that most forms of contemplative practice within Judaism, Christianity and Islam tend to be thematic, scriptural and devotional practices. See (Eifring 2013)

³¹¹ (*Anguttaranikaya* 1, 256)

flexible and conducive for the spiritual path by cultivating three contemplative modalities – uplifting energy (*paggaha*), equanimity (*upekkha*), and concentration (*samadhi*). The sutra goes on to compare contemplative training with the work of a goldsmith. It is not enough to just develop equanimity as this might invite lethargy, nor just cultivating uplifted energy, as this alone easily causes tension. The perfect combination and harmonization of this tripartite schema is the way to go to make one’s mind pliable and easy to work with, according to the sutra. These resemble the three last members of the eightfold path of Buddhism, which are mental effort (*vyayama*), mindfulness (*smṛti*) and concentration (*samadhi*), collectively called *samadhi* in the Buddhist tradition. These are also reminiscent of the three last “limbs” of yoga explicated in the third part of the *Yogasutra*³¹², namely *dharana* (concentration or attention on an object), *dhyana* (exclusive and sustained focus on an object) and *samadhi* (here defined as identity with the object of concentration, and the highest stage of these three limbs)³¹³.

Perfectly mastered and combined, these three last limbs of yoga described in the *Yogasutra* make up what is called *samyama*, which is the exclusive focused identification with a specific object for concentration. The *Yogasutra* goes on to describe how the state of *samyama* can be applied for gaining supernatural powers, and the passage mentioned above from the *Anguttaranikaya* goes on to describe similar powers also³¹⁴.

The interesting thing here, however, is the fact that mindfulness, centering prayer, and christfulness to a lesser but still arguable degree, all follow a similar tripartite scheme. For mindfulness, all its forms include a degree of relaxation and concentration, and for the advanced stages of it, choiceless awareness³¹⁵ is introduced. For Keating, centering prayer involves relaxation, kataphatic and (if one is successful) apophatic contemplation. Kataphatic contemplation means the use and proper preparation of the rational faculties (like memory), while apophatic contemplation means “resting in God beyond concepts and particular acts.”³¹⁶ The kataphatic practices (like using the sacred word to re-establish oneself in awareness of the

³¹² (Braarvig 2014, pp. 46-47)

³¹³ (Samuel 2008, 223)

³¹⁴ The powers that are supposed to appear as a consequence of perfected meditative practice, according to the *Yogasutra* and the passage in *Anguttaranikaya*, include remembrance of past lives, reading people’s minds, super-hearing, etc. (Eliade 1969, 85-90, 177-185) The obvious similarities between the eight limbs of yoga and the eightfold path of Buddhism seem to be “competing systems of rhetoric trying to describe how to achieve human development by meditation.” (Braarvig 2014, 53) There seemed to be a difference of opinion between the classical practitioners of Buddhist meditation as to how contemplative perfection was to be cultivated. There is a clearer emphasis on “seeing” than “letting go” in Buddhist practice, whereas Yoga practice concentrated more on gaining control. (Braarvig 2014, 49)

³¹⁵ Which means “(...) simply being receptive to whatever unfolds in each moment.” (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 71)

³¹⁶ (Keating 2002, 123)

present moment) lead to apophatic contemplation, “which in turn is sustained through appropriate kataphatic practices.”³¹⁷ There is also a three-fold separation in classical contemplative prayer in *lectio divina*, which consists of *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*³¹⁸ (which according to Keating were three necessary aspects of one practice before it was separated in the wake of the post-Reformation era). Christfulness practices also include relaxation, concentration and the cultivation of what Madsen calls “stillness,” in which he occasionally experiences listening to the voice of Christ³¹⁹. There is also a presence-exercise (*nærværøvelse*)³²⁰ where the emphasis is first finding stillness through calming the body, then letting go of everything, detaching from thoughts and everything else that might be distracting. Interestingly, there seems to be a cross-cultural focus on relaxation and peacefulness, focus and control, then a “letting go” of control and a simultaneous effortless and spontaneous awareness that is receptive to change and which can somehow go deeper into the recesses of the psyche³²¹. The ideal of contemplative practices, as systems of regulatory attention, appears to be coherent when it comes to the ingredients that need to be put together in the alchemical process of the contemplative laboratory to transmute the iron of a messy habitual inner life to the dynamic golden inner structure of the contemplative practitioner. This will probably remain as an ideal for most people though, as even highly experienced veterans of practice must concur to a quite messy and habitual-oriented inner life. In either case, despite applying different words and technologies for achieving attentional control and contemplative development, I conclude on the basis of my own understanding of the three contemplative practices and the manuals that explicate them, that there are three “moods” or ingredients for successful contemplation. These are relaxation (peacefulness), concentration (bringing one’s attention towards one point), and awareness (maintaining an open attention towards the external and internal impressions of one’s being). They are necessary as they enhance the practitioner’s experience of the present moment. Brought together and harmonized, these three components could constitute what von Hügel called “multiplicity

³¹⁷ (Keating 2002, 123)

³¹⁸ “They were interwoven one into the other. Like the angels ascending and descending on Jacob’s ladder, one’s attention was expected to go up and down the ladder of consciousness.” (Keating 2002, 21)

³¹⁹ (Madsen 2012, 14)

³²⁰ (Madsen 2012, 36)

³²¹ The scientific research (although incipient and inconclusive) on meditation seems to suggest that “open monitoring”-techniques of contemplation represent a more difficult and advanced stage of contemplative practice, and the traditional understanding of contemplation seem to concur. Still, at this end of the spectrum is where we find the focal point of many contemplative practices today, also others not mentioned in this study. See (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007)

within unity” – a continuous interplay of three opposing yet related modalities that enhance and strengthen mental flexibility.

8.5 Mental flexibility and de-conceptualization

Through such abovementioned training of mental flexibility, the different contemplative practices can seemingly make its practitioners experience what the primary sources refer to as “resting in God” (Keating), “being permeated by Christ” (Madsen), or establishing a “full way of being” (Kabat-Zinn). Through balancing the three main modalities of attention, mental flexibility, and hence pliability, is thought to occur. Such practicing also elicits a process of de-conceptualization according to the sources³²², which is supported by independent sources as well³²³. The process of de-conceptualization can involve a movement from “content” to “process” (e.g. in mindfulness, seeing mental phenomena as constantly changing and interrelated instead of as separate); alterations or even the collapse of the ordinary sense of self (all); significant changes in worldview (all, might more accurately be called re-conceptualization); an increased feeling of freedom from reactivity and activity regarding observable objects, both inner and outer (all); and systematic deconstruction of some of the structures of ordinary consciousness (all), like attitudes and behavioral schemes, thinking, perception, self-system, and time-space matrix.³²⁴

8.6 Paradoxical language games

There is another vitally important element that stands out from the primary sources, and it concerns their usage of language. There are basically two paradoxes that arise out of the practice and interpretation of the three contemplative practices: 1) – the texts *all* stress the non-technicality and non-doing aspects of the practices and the importance of not being preoccupied with the goal, while still being actual technical manuals that are both pre-

³²² (Keating 2002, 237-238),

³²³ (Deikman 1963), (Deikman 1966) and (Brown 1986, 262-268)

³²⁴ (Madsen 2012, 25), (Keating 2002, 16-19, 82-94, 142-145), (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 349-361). See also (Brown 1986, 264)

scriptive and de-scriptive. After all, what is a technique, or indeed any contemplative practice, if it does not pertain to a specific goal? And 2) – the emphasis on non-discursive non-concentrative techniques might, upon closer philosophical scrutiny, turn out to be discursive after all.

Starting with the latter paradox, how can we be sure that a somehow unlanguage inner state is happening while we are practicing? Contemplatives like Keating argue that non-doing and gentle accepting leads to his (darksome) apophatic contemplation, which necessarily must go through the gates of (lightsome) kataphatic contemplation before reaching the darksome stage. In other words, discursive and concentrative methods are indeed necessary even in these contemplative practices, but the evolution of the practice – and this is crucial according to Keating – should lead to an effortless, presence-oriented receiving. The use of the sacred word in the case of centering prayer demonstrates that the practitioner initiates a kind of inner self-dialogue, an asymmetrical self-doubling³²⁵ where the dialogue is held between the practitioner's distracted self and his idealized higher Other. Would not the application of the sacred word, however gently it is used, be a form of self-instruction, and hence a private language game that necessarily is concentrative, discursive and linguistic by its nature? If this is true, is it even possible to remove oneself from such private language games completely? Keating argues yes, as does Kabat-Zinn. They both underscore the usefulness of forgetting³²⁶ and letting go³²⁷ during the course of a practice – letting go of the sense of self, of all kinds of external stimuli and aspirations – a form of omni-forgetting. This relates to the perennialist-contextualist debate in mysticism research, where Foreman argues that one distinct cross-cultural similarity between mystical techniques and doctrines is their insistence on a “forgetting” or “emptying out” of conceptual data, which in his view can lead to a Pure Consciousness Event (PCE)³²⁸.

As to the former paradox, it basically boils down to this: how can non-action lead to change, and how does a technique “transcend” itself and move beyond its own parameters? How does using a technique help towards a movement beyond that same technique? This paradoxicality

³²⁵ “Those who practise successfully rely without exception on an asymmetrical self-doubling in which the inner other has the association of a superior partner, comparable to a genius or an angel, who stays close to its charge like a spiritual monitor and gives them the certainty of being constantly seen, examined and strictly assessed, but also supported in case of a crisis.” (Sloterdijk 2013, 233)

³²⁶ (Keating 2002, 96)

³²⁷ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 297)

³²⁸ See specifically (Forman 1989) and (Forman 1990) generally.

of non-doing and non-technicality characterizes all the three contemplative practices in various degrees. Based on my own experience with these practices, I would argue that the paradox or mystery (hiddenness) of using contemplative practices non-technically can best be understood by von Hügel's Experimental-Emotional-Intuitive element of religion, and my own term of technical mysticism. In brief: by experimenting with practices for inner transformation (technical mysticism), the need for the three modalities of mental flexibility mentioned above becomes clear. Relaxation, concentration and awareness are related processes that directly affect attention, as they all enhance one's experience of the present moment. Intellectual analysis of these processes alone is not sufficient for understanding their practical application in contemplative practice. There is a clear intellectual component to one-pointed focus (concentration), and the mental attitude accompanying it can be described as narrow, suppressive and forceful. Awareness however, (defined as a more diffuse, non-directed open type of focus) has a clear non-concentrative intuitive element, and is conversely accompanied by an inclusive and effortless mental attitude³²⁹. To reach awareness, however, the practitioner usually needs to apply concentration and relaxation, unless it happens spontaneously. Then, when deep focus and a sense of calmness is established, the practitioner can move on into non-directed focus (awareness), which entails a sort of "forgetting" of concentration objects and a deeper "resting" in the present moment. Exactly what such "forgetting" and "resting" entail must be experienced and experimented with through practice, as it is not a clearly delineated process. The psychological torrent of mental and emotional impressions and memories that drag away the attention of the contemplative practitioner is evidence enough of the need for a non-linear approach. What is needed is the application of more relaxation, concentration or awareness according to the nature of the distractions. If tension is a problem, relaxation must be re-established. Tension might arise from an overly forced concentration, which means the need for more awareness, leading to relaxation. "Resting" in awareness can suddenly collapse into day-dreaming, which signals the need for more concentration. The proper appliance of the three modalities will then produce an acceptance and tolerance for the state of extreme complexity and enormous flux that characterizes the experience of the present moment. Therefore, the practitioner's response to

³²⁹ (Eifring 2014, 22)

his experience of the present moment and all of its distractions is something too spontaneous to be pinned down to linearly categorized methodology³³⁰.

As such, I would argue that the source materials' emphasis on non-technicality does not necessarily translate to an outright denial of technical practice (as this would be self-contradictory and paradoxical). Rather, they can be seen as admonitions to avoid excessive goal-orientation and passive reliance on techniques³³¹, which is considered by all three as a great hindrance in the contemplative practice.

8.7 The poietic element – what is “brought forth”

The source material is quite clear as to the effects of contemplative practice. For Keating, centering prayer brings about an “unloading of consciousness”³³² and at more advanced stages, “freedom from cultural conditioning.”³³³ Kabat-Zinn writes about the healing powers of MBSR and its accentuating of greater self-regulation, connectedness and acceptance of change³³⁴. For Madsen, christfulness can bring about “the disentanglement (*opbrud*) of old habits” and a “partaking of divine nature (*delaktighed i guddommelig natur*).”³³⁵ What is brought forth through these practices is a change of habits and greater self-knowledge, according to the sources.

Based on von Hügel's theory, the primary source material can be interpreted as mystical. This is because they extrapolate processes of inner transformation through experimentation, and focus on *lived* and *felt* aspects of their doctrines. Further, there is an interesting and clear operative element at play in all three cases, which is yet another of Hügel's contributions to the study of mysticism. Contrary to traditional understanding of contemplation and mysticism as exclusively innerwordly and reclusive, Hügel identified as part of the mystical the operative and volitional elements present among contemplatives throughout the ages. This can

³³⁰ I repeat: this whole paragraph is my own personal interpretation of the paradox of non-technicality, based on both my readings and my practice.

³³¹ Thus the source material, at least rhetorically, problematizes the excessive focus on what I have defined as technification. See chapter 9 on Critique of Technification.

³³² (Keating 2002, 82-94)

³³³ (Keating 2002, 192-197)

³³⁴ All of which are related, according to: (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 219-231)

³³⁵ (Madsen 2012, 7 & 4)

be seen in our database: Keating describes how contemplation necessarily impels us to action according to our circumstances and abilities.³³⁶ Keating himself founded Contemplative Outreach, an international ecumenical organization dedicated to the dissemination of centering prayer. Although being a Trappist monk, he is also active in hosting retreats throughout the year³³⁷. Madsen is actively spreading christfulness through seminars, online-courses, lectures and city-retreats³³⁸. Additionally, he emphasizes how christfulness can help its practitioners see Christ in others³³⁹, thereby treating them better, and in extension creating a better world. Kabat-Zinn points out how the way of awareness and new understandings of connectedness can bring about greater changes both individually and societally³⁴⁰. He is also occupied with spreading MBSR research and teaching. Thus, I would argue that the three contemplative cases comply with Kaelber's fifth category of asceticism mentioned in chapter two³⁴¹, namely asceticism as transformer of culture. In short, based on the source material, it is clear that contemplative practice does not necessitate nor effect an exclusively passive disposition. On the contrary, it seems to stimulate an operative element that can easily translate into activism of various kinds.

8.8 Experience-dependent neuroplasticity and inner transformation

According to Lutz et al., some neuroscientific research seems to suggest that many core mental processes, like awareness, attention, emotion regulation (including our capacity for happiness and compassion) can best be conceptualized as trainable skills³⁴². This is related to the concept of neuroplasticity, which can be defined as: “the malleability of the brain, observable as changes in neuronal structure and connectivity, typically as a consequence of influence outside of the brain.”³⁴³ This definition hinges on two properties: activity-dependence and changes in

³³⁶ (Keating 2002, 228-235)

³³⁷ (Keating 2002, 122)

³³⁸ (Madsen 2012, 44)

³³⁹ (Madsen 2012, 4, 24-30)

³⁴⁰ (Kabat-Zinn 2004, 149-234, 396-420)

³⁴¹ Kaelber defined the ascetic's relation to culture in five categories. See (Kaelber 1995, 324-328)

³⁴² (Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007, 545)

³⁴³ (Lillard and Erisir 2011, 208)

neural circuits³⁴⁴. In other words, this concept of neuroplasticity seems to confirm what many philosophers and contemplatives have maintained since antiquity: habits, what we repeatedly do, determine who we are and what we become. Or as the neuroscientist would say: neurons that fire together, wire together. If this holds true, then changing habits would necessarily mean that one can change oneself. Seen in this perspective, it seems plausible that contemplative practice can be very effective for inner transformation, given that it is practiced on a regular basis to initiate a sustained change in neural activity. If this hypothesis holds true, then the scientific study of contemplative practice could lead to new insights relevant for psychology, medicine, neuroscience, philosophy, and religious studies.

Neuroplasticity has become a popular kitsch term these days, but it is important to remember that there still are a lot of discrepancies concerning neuroscientists' understanding of the brain generally and neuroplasticity specifically. One such discrepancy is the issue of sudden inner transformation, like a mystical experience. According to the current prevailing understanding of neuroplasticity, structural neuronal changes cannot occur out of the blue – it takes time and repeated stimulus for that to happen. How then can one explain a momentary experience resulting in a lifetime of change? It seems unlikely that the nerve cells could break old connections and make new ones in such short period of time. Newberg suggest that one possible answer to this could be the existence of unused, inactivated neural connections that might somehow be activated and overpower the existing neural connections. If this is the case, we could argue that everyone inhibits the potential for transformative experiences. However, no research has to date been able to find such connections³⁴⁵. Neuroscientific studies of contemplative practices are still in their early phases of working out effective methodologies, and the brain is still the most complex object of study known to man. It is prudent, therefore, to view neuroscientific research on contemplative practice as indicative rather than conclusive³⁴⁶.

Still, the current predominating views on neuroplasticity could explain why long-term practitioners of contemplative practice seem to go through similar experiences and develop similar abilities (like the ones mentioned above). Nevertheless, if we assume that

³⁴⁴ "Neuroplasticity is activity-dependent because sensory activity is the means through which the outside world influences the brain. Repeated motor or cognitive activity can also drive neuroplastic changes. Regardless of the source, a sustained change in a pattern of neural activity is a necessary trigger for neuroplasticity. The change in neural activity pattern leads to a reorganization in neural circuits, which produces long lasting functional change." (Lillard and Erisir 2011, 208)

³⁴⁵ (Newberg 2010, 111)

³⁴⁶ This obviously applies to all science, both within the humanities or the natural sciences.

neuroplasticity works, and that mental processes like happiness and empathy are best conceptualized as trainable skills, then contemplative practice can be understood as a catalyst for inner transformation. Following this line of thinking, and the source material from part II, I want to emphasize the potential converse effects of this hypothesis. If it is true that mental qualities (e.g. empathy) can be strengthened by habitual behavior (contemplative training, emphatic deeds, etc.), then weakening such qualities through habitual behavior should also be possible. As seen above, Keating, Madsen and Kabat-Zinn have warned against certain side-effects that can occur in association with contemplative practice. Keating e.g. underlines how important it is for the contemplative practitioner to cultivate habits of service to others and to god to balance the experiences that arise out of contemplative practice³⁴⁷. Further, there are people who claim that they have consciously practiced and successfully weakened their empathic sensibilities through contemplative training. The most notorious example to come to mind is the Norwegian terrorist A. Behring Breivik, responsible for the 22. July Oslo bombings and shootings on Utøya in 2011, which killed 77 people. To prepare for the terrorist attack, Breivik claims in his manifesto that he started a process of de-socialization in 2006, consisting of a training regimen of meditation and philosophizing for 40 minutes on an almost daily basis. During these sessions, he claims he would perform a “mental simulation of the operation”³⁴⁸ and self-indoctrination. In 2012, during the trial, he further stated that he started a form of “Bushido-meditation”³⁴⁹ in 2006, and was practicing this regularly as preparation. There are reasons to believe that these claims found both in the manifesto and during the trial are false, being simply the attempt of a terrorist to present himself in a self-orchestrated favorable light³⁵⁰. Whether they are true or not, however, is beside the point. The point of my argumentation is that such a development of consciously weakening mental processes like compassion, tolerance, etc., could be possible, theoretically, if the converse is possible. The implications of this would then be that inner transformation that is long-lasting is indeed possible through contemplative training. But the ability to effect inner transformation, if this is even possible, could be a double-edged sword.

³⁴⁷ “The cultivation of habits of dedication to God and of service to others is the indispensable means of stabilizing the mind in the face of emotionally charged thoughts, whether of self-exaltation or of self-depreciation.” (Keating 2002, 17)

³⁴⁸ (Li 2011)

³⁴⁹ (Barstein, Hansen, and Meldalen 2012)

³⁵⁰ E.g. the issue of meditative preparation did not come up during the trial until after the issue of mental accountability became an issue.

8.9 Conclusion: Master key or just deep relaxation?

In chapter 3, I defined contemplative practice as any self-administered attention-based operation or procedure producing deep relaxation, and which provides or improves the actor's qualification for the next performance of the same operation, ultimately aiming for inner transformation. It is general enough to fit all three cases from part II, yet specific enough to make it useful as an analytical category. The definition highlights the most important aspects of contemplative practice: namely its focus on attention-regulation, relaxation, repetition, and inner transformation. By including inner transformation, the definition accounts for the comparable reports from different contemplative narratives of its effects in changing habits, lifestyle, and self-image. In this sense contemplative practice can be seen as a master key to metacognition, initiating a process of self-discovery and wonder as to one's own capacity for growth and learning. This is arguably the most attractive component of contemplative practice. This positive notion of the transformative power of contemplative practice is further substantiated by neuroscientific discourses that emphasize the brain's plasticity and ability to change through repeated and self-directed stimuli.

However, there is arguably only one thing that has been proven scientifically beyond any reasonable doubt concerning contemplative practices: their positive effects on relaxation³⁵¹. Everything else – whether it is the effects of brain plasticity, treatment for depression, increased memory, etc. – is still not validated by enough research to account as evidence for its effectiveness³⁵² or establish indisputable causal relationships.

Based on practitioners' reports, it is clear that contemplative practice is not only a pleasant exploration of one's mind and psychological faculties, but also a sometimes difficult and scary endeavor. It is often presented as gradual and hard, but worth bearing the pain if one perseveres through the difficulties. An analogy to contemplative practice that clarifies its relation to *techne* might be pregnancy: something new is produced through participatory means and cultivated over a period of time, but it is not always pleasant. The process can in some cases be dangerous. However, the end result is well worth the pain and agony. In this sense, it is clear that contemplative practice is best approached by evaluating its meaning for the individual, which is best done through participatory – i.e. technical – means. Whether

³⁵¹ (Benson and Klipper 2000)

³⁵² There are strong indications, however, that contemplative practices can work for many people as a treatment for depression, means for self-control, and be helpful in many other ways. See (Heuman 2014)

understood as a master key to great wonders or simply an effective relaxation exercise, contemplative practice is best conceptualized as *techne* insofar as it is seen as a craft or art of personal development (mental, emotional, spiritual, etc.). *Techne* underlines the most essential aspect of contemplative practice: that there is in fact something we can do to bring about change; we do not have to wait for it.

9 Criticism and *Techne*

In the last chapter I examined *techne*'s relevance for the individual by relating it to contemplative practice. In this chapter, I will start out by briefly considering *techne*'s relation to society through the process I have called technification. From this starting point, the discussion will evolve into some critical perspectives on the research I have presented in this dissertation. The two main issues examined through the source material so far have been: to what extent is *techne* related to contemplative practice, and how do the sources explain and justify their emphasis on the technical aspect of their teachings?

9.1 Technification as reductionism

I have defined technification as a process where the mystical-experimental elements of religion predominate at the expense of the institutional and the intellectual. I argue that this can come about as a reaction to the other elements, or to competing kinds of mystical-experimental expressions. Our source material can be seen in this light: mindfulness as an extensive continuation of the technification process initiated by the convergence of Western romantic expectations mingling with Asian Buddhist reform leaders during the last century; christfulness as a reaction to the success of mindfulness and the general secular disposition of Scandinavian culture; centering prayer as a response to Vatican II's admonitions to reinvigorate and bring back the Christian contemplative tradition following a half-millennia long disrepute within the Catholic Church. However, it is important to distinguish my etic interpretations from their emic perspectives: Keating and Madsen are very clear that their practices should not be done to the exclusion of other communal aspects like church-attendance, charity, etc., of Christian life. Kabat-Zinn on the other hand continuously stresses the need for wholeness and balance, for integrating mindfulness practice into daily life, and is arguably more technically oriented. It would be too simplistic to assume that religion or contemplation can be fully explicated through *techne* alone, both emically and etically. Hence, I do not agree with Sloterdijk's claim that there never existed "religions" but rather immunological systems of training "captured" through the rhetoric of so-called "religious" specialists³⁵³. I do agree with von Hügel however, that the technical side must be seen

³⁵³ "We must confront one of the most massive pseudo-evidences in recent intellectual history: the belief, rampant in Europe since only two or three centuries ago, in the existence of 'religions' - and more than that, against the unverified faith in the existence of faith." (Sloterdijk 2013, 5)

together with the other main elements in any comprehensive analysis, whether it is of contemplative practice or religion.

9.2 The adaptability of contemplative practice

Technification can be revealing in another sense, namely in how it works as a “rebrander” or adaptive force, for contemplative practices in this case, to suit the needs of the contemplative/religious market. With christfulness a deliberate rebranding takes place. Recall Keating’s explanation of the compartmentalization of lectio divina that occurred during especially the 16th-century, and his crediting of Saint Ignatius for “saving” an important part of contemplative tradition by adapting contemplative practices into ones adjusted to the needs of the times. The success of MBSR, and Kabat-Zinn’s “translational” work of adapting Buddhist notions to a psychologized language, is probably the best case example of contemplative adaptability. In this context, technification might beneficially be included in the (post)secularization debate. The case of MBSR is illustrative: here is a set of contemplative practices that originally came from religious spheres, gaining popularity in secularized³⁵⁴ countries of the West, so much so that they are appearing in public spheres (e.g. healthcare and education)³⁵⁵ where the influence of religion was thought to be clearly delimited. This seems to go against Weber’s notion of disenchantment. Therefore it might be worth examining the relationship between the societal and individual dimensions of secularization³⁵⁶ on the one hand and technification on the other, and whether technification can be understood as a part of or reaction to secularization³⁵⁷.

9.3 Practice as Problem

In relation to reductionism, a strong objection to my comparative approach in this study could be that by comparing the technical, participatory and enactive elements of contemplative practice – i.e., interpreting it through the lens of *techné* – I have downplayed the importance

³⁵⁴ Secular in Dobbelaere’s first sense, the societal dimension of secularization: “the emphasis lies on functional differentiation: sectors of society which historically were controlled by the church begin gradually to emerge as separate and autonomous spheres.” (Davie 2007, 49)

³⁵⁵ (Grace and Simmer-Brown 2011), (Ruff and MacKenzie 2009)

³⁵⁶ (Davie 2007, 50)

³⁵⁷ Technification could e.g. be seen as a response to pluralism – i.e. a response to the increase of religious choices – and hence as a related process to secularization. On a competing religious market of ideas and practices, some competitors might try to emulate the success of e.g. mindfulness by creating a similar praxis. Christfulness is obviously the best example of this.

of socio-cultural context. Such elements can arguably mean just as much, or possibly even more, for the effects and meanings attributed to contemplative practices, compared to the technical features. I have, however, contextualized the cases studied by tracing the origin and contemporary landscape wherein they exist. My choice of focusing on *techne* stems from the expectation that such an approach could reveal aspects of the practices that might not be clear through a process of phenomenological bracketing and historical readings alone. After all, texts describing contemplative practices can often be normative and prescriptive rather than descriptive³⁵⁸, and it can be next to impossible to know whether they are talking about practices, the effects of practices, or mental states³⁵⁹. It is therefore better to use contemporary practice manuals if we want more specificity about the practices involved. Applying a *techne*-oriented approach would make it clearer whether a manual for a contemplative practice is in fact describing a practice, or something else. Such an approach would entail blurring the line between the emic and the etic regarding contemplative practice.

9.4 Conclusion: *Techne* as movement between emic and etic perspectives

My practice of contemplative techniques as a method of participant observation could be criticized for being apologetic and essentialist. In the last chapter I did e.g. choose to focus more on the similarities between the practices than the differences, as this was how I increasingly came to view them through my practicing and re-reading of the source material – as similar (but not identical) systems of contemplative development. One response to such critique would be that the *techne*-orientation applied in this study must be inherently reflexive if it is to produce valuable results. By participating in the very object of this study by practicing contemplative techniques, and applying *techne* as a research category, I have effectually situated myself in a movement between emic and etic perspectives. The two main characteristics of my conception of *techne* are its poietic (i.e. revelatory and creative) nature and its harmonizing and intermediary nature between the practical and the theoretical. I find *techne* to be one of the most profound concepts of Greek history, as it attests to the living spontaneous reality of phenomena, and how one should relate to them – not through mere analysis or synthesis, but rather through the continuous artful harmonization of both.

³⁵⁸ See e.g. (Sharf 1995, 235-240) and (Bronkhorst 2014)

³⁵⁹ (Eifring 2014, 2-5)

Therefore, both as a technical concept related to lifestyle and as a research category, I believe *techne* is greatly suited as an analytical tool for the study of religion. Being in a state of flux between observation-near (emic) and observation-distant (etic) perspectives, I would argue that my *techne*-orientation implies considerable reflexivity. It is never constant, and therefore closer to living phenomena than any categorization.

Finally, the question of validity and reliability must be raised: How valid is my comparison between the three contemplative techniques? Although technically similar, the sources apply different concepts and represent different ontologies. Despite this, I argue that the similarities in aims, motivations, side-effects, technicalities within the practices, and the neurobiological effects validate such a comparison. My definition of contemplative practice concurred well with all three cases. This does not mean, however, that I can generalize about all contemplative practices based on the things I uncovered about the three under study. Indeed, comparative work can be criticized for being insensitive to contexts, or for being too essentializing. My admittedly wide definition of contemplative practice might prove to be too wide after closer scrutiny. Nevertheless, it proved to be sufficient for my main research task throughout this dissertation, which was to examine the relation between *techne* and contemplative practice.

10 Conclusion: Contemplative practice as *techne*

This somewhat unusual study has been an attempt to use an ancient concept, *techne*, to shed light and hopefully new insights on contemplative practice. The underlying research question has been: to what extent can contemporary contemplative practices be understood as a form of *techne*? In case the meaning of *techne* is still unclear, the question can be rephrased like this: to what extent can contemporary contemplative practices be understood as a form of creative and harmonizing art or craft? To answer this question, I have mainly relied on the theories of von Hügel, Sloterdijk, and Eifring, and many others have been consulted in the course of the investigation. Based on the research literature of asceticism, mysticism and partly neuroscience, I developed the following definition of contemplative practice: any self-administered attention-based operation or procedure producing deep relaxation, and that provides or improves the actor's qualification for the next performance of the same operation, ultimately aiming for inner transformation. Having shown that this definition worked with the three cases studied, I believe it can be applied as a heuristic in terms of other contemplative practices as well. I have operated with concepts like technification and technical mysticism based on the theories of von Hügel, and maintain that these concepts could deserve further elaboration and investigation. Technification, as a process of contemplative-religious adaptivity throughout history, could possibly be used to deepen our understanding of secularization. Technical mysticism, defined as training and experimenting with practices of inner transformation, could be a useful category for studying certain types of contemplatives who focus exclusively on the transformative aspects of their training.

Through my analysis of mindfulness, christfulness and centering prayer, I have tried to show throughout the study how *techne* and the process of contemplative practice are deeply related. I have implicitly argued that contemplative practice in the most certain degree can be understood as a form of *techne*. Von Hügel's "multiplicity within unity" is an apt description of *techne* – it is both an ability to respond to complexity and a movement between the particular and the general, the close-by and the distant, the emic and the etic. Likewise, I would argue that contemplative practice represents both an ability to respond to complexity, and a movement through different perspectives. They both represent intermediary positions, and through their participation they seem to initiate a process of change.

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